



Govt studying Similipal Black Tiger Safari Project

Consulting environmentalists, local stakeholders to assess ecological impact

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

The Odisha Government is carrying out a comprehensive study before taking a final decision on the proposed Similipal Black Tiger Safari near the Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) in Mayurbhanj district, said Forest, Environment and Climate Change Minister Ganesh Ram

Singkhuntia on Monday. Addressing a press conference here, Singhkhuntia said the proposed project, envisioned as the world's first safari dedicated to melanistic (black) tigers, is being evaluated from ecological, scientific and socio-economic perspectives. He said scientists, wildlife experts, environmentalists, forest officials, local communities and elected public representatives are being consulted as part of the assessment process. The study is examining the safari's feasibility, likely impact on the ecosystem,

wildlife movement, biodiversity, local livelihoods and the long-term sustainability of the project. "We are conducting a detailed research on the Similipal Black Tiger Safari Project. The views of local people and public representatives are also being taken into consideration. Teams are examining the potential impact of the project, the benefits it could bring and whether there could be any adverse effects," Singhkhuntia said. The proposed safari has generated considerable interest because Similipal is globally known for its rare population of mela-

nistic Royal Bengal tigers, a unique genetic trait found in only a few tigers in the reserve. While supporters believe the project could promote wildlife tourism, conservation awareness and local employment, some conservationists have urged the government to ensure that the safari does not disturb the reserve's fragile ecosystem or compromise in-situ conservation efforts. The minister reiterated that no final decision would be taken until all scientific studies, expert opinions and stakeholder consultations are completed.

Ex-Servicemen welfare IESL Odisha reaffirms commitment

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

The annual general body meeting (AGM) of the Indian Ex-Servicemen League (IESL), Odisha, was held here on Sunday with representatives of district ex-servicemen associations and affiliated veteran organisations from across the State participating in the deliberations.

The meeting reviewed the League's activities and achievements over the past five years, with a special focus on the welfare of ex-servicemen, Veer Naris (war widows), family pensioners and their dependants.

General secretary Veteran POR (SPL) Bidyadhara Nayak presented a detailed report on the organisation's initiatives through a power point presentation, while treasurer Veteran JWO Arun Mohanty placed the audited accounts for the past five years before the General Body.

Concerns were also raised over the alleged freezing of the IESL



Odisha's savings bank account by the State Bank of India. Nayak said the matter has been taken up with the Union Finance Secretary, the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, the SBI Chairman, the Chief General Manager of SBI and the Inspector General of Registration (IGR), Cuttack, but no satisfactory response has been received so far. The AGM reviewed various representations and policy recommendations submitted by IESL Odisha to the Government of India, the Ministry of Defence, the Department of Ex-Servicemen Welfare, the Government of Odisha and the Rajya Sainik Board on issues concerning the welfare

and rights of the veteran community. Among the major achievements highlighted were progress towards the establishment of a permanent Circuit Bench of the Armed Forces Tribunal (AFT) at Cuttack following a Supreme Court judgment, sustained efforts to secure employment opportunities, reservation, equal remuneration and welfare measures for ex-servicemen, and initiatives for setting up an Additional District Sainik Board in Bhubaneswar. The League also highlighted its recommendations to the 8th Central Pay Commission, including revision of the pension formula,

rationalisation of Dearness Allowance, enhancement of family pension, upgradation of pay matrix levels for Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs), uniform disability pension, rationalisation of Military Service Pay and improved healthcare benefits under the Ex-Servicemen Contributory Health Scheme (ECHS). The general body adopted a comprehensive action plan to strengthen veteran welfare, employment, healthcare, legal assistance and social security in the coming years. It also resolved to work closely with the Centre, the Odisha Government, the Kendriya Sainik Board and other authorities to safeguard the interests of the ex-servicemen community. IESL Odisha president Dr Col Jyotirmaya Satapathy appreciated the efforts of office-bearers and district units and reaffirmed the organisation's commitment to the welfare of veterans, national security and nation building.

BJD alleges use of children in BJP rally

Seeks OSCPCR's notices to CM, BJP State chief, ex-MLA Biswal

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

The BJD on Monday approached the Odisha State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (OSPCPR) alleging that children were used in a BJP political procession held in Bhubaneswar on July 12 during the induction programme of former MLA Prabhat Ranjan Biswal into the party.

A BJD delegation submitted a memorandum to OSCPCR Chairperson Babita Patra alleging that minors participated in the procession wearing BJP caps and scarves while carrying party flags, placards and banners. The party claimed that involving children in political programmes was inappropriate and raised concerns over their rights and safety.

In its complaint, the BJD urged the commission to investigate the



matter and issue notices to Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, BJP Odisha president Manmohan Samal and former MLA Prabhat Biswal. The BJD contended that children should not be used for political publicity or campaign activities and described the incident as a violation of child rights. It requested the commission to take appropriate action after examining the facts. The delegation comprised Sumitra Jena, Pushpanjali Rana, Jyotsnamayee Parida, Banaja Mohanty, Ila Swain, Anshu Tripathy, Bhagyashree Jena and Dr Priyabrata Majhi.

Cong seeks SC-monitored probe into Ram temple fund

PCC chief questions PM's silence

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

The Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee (OPCC) has demanded a Supreme Court-monitored investigation into the alleged financial irregularities in the Shree Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust and questioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi's silence over the issue.

Addressing a press conference at Congress Bhawan on Sunday, OPCC president Bhakta Charan Das, West Bengal Congress media department chairperson Mita Chakraborty, PCC media chairman Arabinda Das and spokesperson Rajani Mohanty alleged that the Special Investigation Team (SIT) report has raised serious questions over the handling of temple funds.

The Congress leaders claimed that while the SIT reportedly recommended action against a few lower-level employees, no action

has been initiated against senior trust functionaries. They questioned why an independent probe under the direct supervision of the Supreme Court has not been ordered. The party demanded that the Prime Minister clarify the role of the Centre in the constitution and functioning of the trust, register FIRs against all those allegedly involved irrespective of their position, and order a judicial probe monitored by the Supreme Court. It also sought a forensic audit of all donations, land transactions and expenditure related to the Ram Temple project besides reconstituting the existing trust to ensure greater transparency and accountability. Das alleged that only junior employees are being made accountable while senior officials are being protected. Referring to the reported SIT findings, Congress leaders alleged that security protocols governing cash counting have been weakened, facilitating alleged irregularities.

IIT BBS scientist part of new Next-G computing

Study shows world's largest synchronised network of over 1L spintronic oscillators

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

An international team of scientists, including researchers from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bhubaneswar, has achieved a major breakthrough towards faster, smarter and energy-efficient computing. The findings, published in Nature Nanotechnology, demonstrate the world's largest synchronised network of more than 100,000 nanoscale spintronic oscillators, tiny magnetic devices that work together like a coordinated orchestra.

Unlike conventional computer chips that process information se-

quentially, these devices naturally synchronise within 45 billionths of a second (45 nanoseconds), enabling extremely fast information processing while consuming only a fraction of the energy used by today's electronic technologies. The synchronised network is nearly 1,000 times larger than previously demonstrated coherent spintronic systems, marking a major advance towards practical next-generation computing hardware. Using advanced microwave and optical microscopy techniques, researchers directly observed thousands of the devices spontaneously organising into a single synchronized state, confirming that even ultra-large networks can coordinate remarkably fast. Although still at the research stage, the technology could trans-

form artificial intelligence (AI), smarter communication networks, real-time data analysis, financial modelling and optimisation, intelligent transportation systems, and scientific simulations requiring enormous computing power. One of the study's lead authors and IIT Bhubaneswar Department of Physics Assistant Professor Dr Nilamani Behera, said the growing demand for computing power, especially with the rise of AI, requires new approaches. He said the research demonstrates that very large networks of nanoscale magnetic devices can naturally synchronise within a few billionths of a second, opening possibilities for computing technologies that are faster and far more energy-efficient. The study was conducted

through an international collaboration involving the University of Gothenburg (Sweden), IIT Bhubaneswar (India), and Tohoku University (Japan). Besides advancing the fundamental understanding of how large networks of interacting nanoscale devices behave, the findings provide an important foundation for developing brain-inspired computing technologies that could overcome the growing energy and performance limitations of conventional computers. The research paper, "Nanoscale Phase Ordering in Ultra-large Spin Hall Nano-oscillator Lattices for Unconventional Computing," has been published in Nature Nanotechnology, one of the world's leading journals in nanoscience and nanotechnology.

Interview of the week

Public life demands the courage to stand up for what is right



SUGYAN CHOUDHURY



DR PRADEEP KUMAR PANIGRAHY

Dr Pradeep Kumar Panigrahy is a distinguished politician, advocate and legal consultant. He is the Member of Parliament (MP) from the Berhampur constituency. His public service journey began as a prominent student leader at the Berhampur University. He holds an LLM and a PhD, specialising in biodiversity conservation under international and Indian law. Representing the Gopalpur Assembly constituency as an MLA for three consecutive terms between 2009 and 2024, he served as Odisha's Minister of Higher Education, Science & Technology. Formerly associated with the BJD, he later joined the BJP and secured a mandate in the 2024 General Elections, entering the 18th Lok Sabha, in which he is recognised for his articulate interventions on geopolitical, regional, and economic issues. He serves on the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and the Consultative Committee for the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways. In an interview with *The Pioneer*, Dr Panigrahy spoke to Sugyan Choudhury on south Odisha's industrial resurgence, global supply chains, coastal security and Odisha's evolving political landscape. **Under your leadership, Brahmapur is emerging as southern Odisha's economic gateway; what is your long-term vision for transforming Ganjam into a major logistics, manufacturing and investment hub?** Ganjam was among India's most prosperous regions during the 1st and 2nd Centuries. It emerged as one of the country's foremost maritime trade centres. Over time, however, this prosperity declined, and the district became synonymous with distress migration, compelling countless people to leave in search of livelihoods. My vision is to restore Ganjam's historic prominence by creating opportunities, strengthening infrastructure, and fostering sustainable economic growth. The

revival of Gopalpur Port as a fully operational commercial port marks a significant step towards this goal. Further strengthening the region's economic prospects, the Government of India has approved a new deep-sea port at Bahuda. This transformative Rs 20,000-Rs 21,500-crore project is expected to generate large-scale investment and employment. The development of Rangeilunda Airport is progressing rapidly while the long-pending six-laning of the Ganjam stretch of NH-16 up to Ichchapuram has received approval. The Coastal Highway is also gaining momentum. In addition, the government has approved a Jeypore-Brahmapur six-lane highway. The Chief Minister has approved a Rs 100-crore national-standard sports complex at Sheetallapalli and an 11-storey IT Tower, both of which will create new opportunities for youths. We have also proposed a shipbuilding unit at Palur, which I am actively pursuing as a member of the Consultative Committee of the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, along with a Bio-Pharma Park to strengthen domestic pharmaceutical manufacturing. The Union Budget 2026 has further strengthened Ganjam's future through the proposed Green Energy Hub and Rare Earth Corridor at Gopalpur SEZ. Rich monazite deposits in the Rushikulya riverbed present a strategic opportunity for India. I have urged the Chief Minister to ensure strict protection of these resources so they can be processed within Odisha to promote value addition and skilled employment. **With Ganjam's coastline making it vulnerable to illegal infiltration, what measures are being taken to strengthen coastal security and protect local communities?** Ganjam's extensive coastline is a massive economic asset, but it brings unique challenges regarding maritime security and illegal infiltration. As a member of the External Affairs Committee, I have strongly advocated for a tighter coastal se-

curity apparatus. We are pushing for coordination among coastal police stations, deployment of advanced radar networks and enhanced patrolling by the Indian Coast Guard. I am actively pushing for regular joint exercises to track suspicious vessel movements. Besides, protecting local fishermen remains our absolute priority. **Your transition from the BJD to the BJP was widely seen as a catalyst for political change in Odisha. Looking back, do you feel the party has rewarded your role appropriately?** To be elected by the public with a massive mandate is a rare privilege. My greatest satisfaction comes from serving my constituency. I share an excellent equation with the BJP leadership. **Many are looking at Sujata Karthikeyan and Santrupt Misra as potential pillars for the BJD's revival. What's your view?** Educated individuals with a passion for politics will always find their way into public life. The BJD will naturally try to revive its base, and time alone will determine their success or failure. However, I will say this: when political structures begin to fracture internally and develop complex systemic health issues, leaders often resort to "cosmetic surgeries" to signal to the public that they are moving forward. But cosmetic surgery is merely a temporary fix; it is never a permanent panacea. **You once declared, 'Pana Sankranti re panji kholibi.' With the elections won and a new government in place, when will Odisha finally see this 'panji' opened and what gives you the courage to take on such high-stakes political battles?** I stand firmly by my statement. Since then, several facts have emerged in the public domain regarding the alleged irregularities and corruption of the previous regime, while investigations and legal processes continue. Truth unfolds gradually, and the remaining facts will come out at the appropriate time through due process. As for courage and my conviction, it comes from the values instilled in me by my parents, the unwavering support of my family and the immense faith reposed in me by the people of Odisha. My spiritual strength is reinforced through regular visits to Lord Lingaraj and Lord Jagannath. More importantly, I have always believed that public life demands the courage to stand up for what is right. I have consistently raised my voice against corruption and injustice. I believe a person's convictions are reflected through their actions, decisions and public record.

At RD University Gyanprabha Mission's 'Srujanika' held

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

Gyanprabha Mission organised the 'Srujanika' programme at the Rama Devi Women's University here on Saturday in the divine presence of Guruji Paramahansa Prajnanananda Maharaj. The programme was inaugurated by Prof Jyotsna KB Rout, Vice-Chancellor Rama Devi Women's University. The forenoon session featured a panel discussion on the education system with eminent speakers, including Dr Shruti Mahapatra, founder of Swabhiman, Mitali Chhinnara, former Professor, Manas Ranjan Nanda, Professor, Ekamra College and Sanjay Suar, Principal of KIIT



International School. Guruji Paramahansa Prajnanananda Maharaj said teachers have the power to bring about both social and spiritual transformation through their dedication, values and commitment to education. The afternoon session, also held in the presence of the Guruji, was attended by Guha Poonam Tapas Kumar, Secretary, Department of

Handlooms, Textiles and Handicrafts, Sonamika Ray, District Education Officer, Khordha; and Palli Pattnaik, founder of Mothers Public School. Nearly 600 teachers from schools and colleges across the State participated in the programme. The event was coordinated by the volunteer teams of Gyanprabha Mission and Prajnan Mission.

In Ganjam Ayush doc detained for raping minor girl

PNS ■ Brahmapur

An AYUSH doctor was detained by police after a 14-year-old girl alleged that she was sexually assaulted during a medical examination at a private clinic under the Jagannathprasad police station in Ganjam district.

According to the complaint, the girl had visited the clinic with her mother for a health check-up on Sunday evening. The doctor allegedly took the girl to a separate room, claiming that a gynaecological examination

was required. About 30 minutes later, the teenager reportedly emerged from the room in tears and informed her mother that she had been sexually assaulted.

The victim also alleged that the doctor threatened to kill her if she disclosed the incident to anyone. Based on the complaint, police detained the doctor, identified as Sameer Pradhan and began questioning him.

A case has been registered, and police are collecting evidence as part of the probe. Police officials have not com-

mented on the allegations or disclosed further details. The investigation is continuing, and authorities said appropriate legal action will be taken based on the outcome of the investigation.

"The Ayush doctor admitted in front of the IIC that he had made a mistake. The IIC even told him, 'You did this kind of act to a 14-year-old child; you tortured her and raped her. There is no bigger sinner than you in this world. You are not fit to be a doctor'," a neighbour of the victim claimed.

9 fishers' bodies recovered from trawler

3 brothers from Baleshwar among crew members

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

Anxiety has turned into grief for several families in Odisha on Monday after bodies of nine fishermen were recovered from a capsized trawler off the West Bengal coast while six crew members are still missing. Among those on board were three brothers from Bhograi block in Baleshwar district, Rabindra Majhi, Jagannath Majhi and Jayaram Majhi.

The fishing trawler had departed from Shankarpur Fishing Harbour in West Bengal's East Midnapore district on July 2 for a Hilsa fishing expedition. Contact with the vessel was lost on July 5 after it reportedly encountered rough weather triggered by a low-pressure system over the Bay of Bengal.

The overturned trawler was later spotted near Rakeswari Bali Char in the Sundarbans by local fishermen, prompting a joint rescue operation involving the Indian Coast Guard, Gobardhanpur Police and the Forest Department. After the vessel was towed to Sitarampur jetty, rescue teams pumped out water from the submerged

trawler and recovered nine bodies from inside.

With identification yet to be completed, families from Baleswar have left for West Bengal to identify the deceased. Bhograi MLA Goutam Buddha Das said he has been coordinating with the local administration, the neighbouring State's MLA and trawler associations to facilitate the process.

The Odisha Government is coordinating closely with its West Bengal counterpart to assist the affected families and ensure the identification and transportation of the bodies once formalities are completed.

Stray dog attack cases on rise in Ganjam



Extend ABC model to rural parts, urges activist

PRASANT DAS ■ Brahmapur

Concern is mounting over the rising number of stray dog attacks on children, elderly people, and women in both urban and rural areas in Ganjam. The issue has gained renewed attention after a six-year-old child was injured in a stray dog attack at Mahanal village in the district.

A few days earlier, another child from the same village had also fallen victim to a similar attack. Similar incidents have been reported from several blocks and NAC areas across the district, highlighting the urgent need for a planned and long-term solution.

Providing medical treatment to victims after each incident alone cannot solve the problem. Experts and animal welfare advocates stress that a scientific, humane, and sustainable approach is essential. The Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme is internationally recognised as the most effective and humane method of controlling the stray dog population. Its successful implementation in the Brahmapur Municipal Corporation (BeMC) area has dem-

onstrated its effectiveness.

However, the programme remains largely limited to urban areas. In rural regions, where the stray dog population continues to increase, there are no regular sterilisation or anti-rabies vaccination programmes, leaving residents—especially children, women, and senior citizens—at greater risk.

Animal welfare activist Lalatendu Choudhury has urged the government to replicate the successful ABC model of BeMC by establishing stray dog sterilisation and anti-rabies vaccination centres in every block of Ganjam district. He said the initiative is vital not only for animal welfare but also for public safety, rabies prevention, and community well-being.

He also appealed to the government and district administration to act before more people, particularly children, become victims of stray dog attacks. He called for dedicated funding, trained personnel, veterinary doctors, and necessary infrastructure to implement the ABC programme in every block. He further emphasised the need for awareness campaigns involving panchayats, voluntary organisations, and local communities.

Textbook errors BJD holds rally in B'pur, submits memo to RDC



Demands Edu Min's resignation

PNS ■ Brahmapur

Alleging serious errors in the newly introduced textbooks for Classes I to VIII under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) launched its Statewide "Save Education" campaign with a massive protest in front of the RDC Office in Brahmapur.

Thousands of youth and students participated in a large rally before staging a demonstration outside the RDC office. Biju Yuva Janata Dal State president Chinmay Sahoo was present at the protest.

The protestors alleged that despite the discovery of major errors in the new textbooks, the BJP-led State government has failed to withdraw or correct them, thereby jeopardizing the future of school students. The party said it had earlier demanded a CBI inquiry into the alleged Rs 380-crore textbook publication scam and sought the resignation of the School and Mass Education Minister, but no meaningful action has been taken so far.

The party leaders expressed concern that examinations are only a few months away, yet the allegedly erroneous textbooks remain in circulation. They claimed that forcing students to study from such

books could adversely affect their academic performance and future.

The BJD also stated that while Odisha earned national recognition for educational reforms during the tenure of former Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik through the 5T initiative, the State is now facing criticism over the quality of its new textbooks. According to the party, the widespread mistakes in the Odia textbooks are not merely administrative lapses but an insult to the Odia language, literature, culture, and heritage, besides posing a serious threat to the educational future of lakhs of students.

During the protest, the party leaders strongly criticised the State government's handling of the issue. The Youth and Student wing members staged a symbolic protest by dancing to the song "Nimbuda Nimbuda." A memorandum was later submitted to the Odisha Government through the RDC, demanding immediate corrective action.

The protest was attended by former MPs Chandrasekhar Sahu and Pramila Bisoi, former MLA Dr Ramesh Chandra Chyapatnaik, former BeDA Chairman Subash Maharana, and several senior BJD leaders, corporators, youth activists, and party workers from different parts of the district.

Fish Farmers Day at CIFA Adopt modern aquaculture technologies, fish farmers urged



PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

The ICAR-Central Institute of Freshwater Aquaculture (ICAR-CIFA), Bhubaneswar, observed the National Fish Farmers Day 2026 at its Kausalyaganga campus on July 10.

The day is commemorated every year in memory of the historic breakthrough achieved by Dr KH Alikunhi and Dr HL Chaudhuri, who successfully induced breeding of Indian major carps on July 10, 1957, laying the scientific foundation for modern freshwater aquaculture in India.

Additional Secretary, Department of Agriculture and Farmers Empowerment, Government of Odisha Subhranshu Mishra graced the occasion as the chief guest. He encouraged fish farmers and entrepreneurs to adopt modern aquaculture technologies and diversify into value-added enterprises for improving productivity and income. Mishra highlighted the op-

portunities available under the Mukhyamantri Krushi Udyog Yojana and informed the participants that women entrepreneurs are eligible for subsidy of up to 50 per cent of the capital investment under the provisions of the scheme. He also emphasised the importance of stronger linkages among research institutions, government agencies, entrepreneurs and farmers for accelerating technology adoption and sustainable growth of the fisheries sector.

Former Assistant Director General (Inland Fisheries), ICAR, New Delhi, Dr Bimal Prasanna Mohanty attended the programme as the guest of honour. He recalled the pivotal role of induced breeding technology in the development of India's Blue Revolution and highlighted the importance of fisheries in addressing the country's nutritional and protein requirements.

University of Agriculture and Technology (OUAT), Bhubaneswar, Dr Niranjana Panda highlighted Odisha's immense fisheries potential and the steady growth of the sector in the State. He referred to the significant increase in fish and seafood exports from the State, reflecting the expanding role of fisheries in Odisha's economy.

Earlier, Director, ICAR-CIFA, Dr Pramoda Kumar Sahoo welcomed the dignitaries and participants. He briefly highlighted the institute's contributions towards fish breeding, quality seed production, species diversification and technology dissemination through partnerships with seed multiplier units, incubatees, entrepreneurs and fish farmers for strengthening freshwater aquaculture in the country.

Around 150 fish farmers, entrepreneurs, scientists, officials, trainees and media representatives, along with participants from different States of India and Sri Lanka, attended the programme.

Progressive fish farmers and entrepreneurs were felicitated.

The ICAR-CIFA Hindi magazine Neelimita was released. Three Memoranda of Understanding were signed with M/s Durga Fish Seed Farm (Multiplier Unit), Dr Nina Singh (Incubatee) and Deepak Ranjan Sethi (Incubatee) to strengthen fish seed multiplication, entrepreneurship development and wider dissemination of ICAR-CIFA technologies.

The inaugural session was followed by a Farmers-Scientists Interaction. Scientists from ICAR-CIFA interacted with the farmers and provided technical guidance on the issues raised. The programme concluded with a vote of thanks by Principal Scientist and Scientist-in-Charge, Social Science Section, ICAR-CIFA Dr HK De.

In Jagatsinghpur Drive on to make roads, drains encroachment-free

KAHNU NANDA ■ Jagatsinghpur

The Jagatsinghpur district administration and local municipal authority have launched a massive eviction drive on the outskirts of the town to address congestion, drainage issues, and ensure smooth traffic flow.

The drive focused on a 2 km stretch between main town roads connected to Gandhi Chhak on NH 55.

Official reports informed that in the last two days, hundreds of unauthorised structures were demolished, mainly encroached roadside land by a few shopkeepers and landowners. The eviction is part of a larger plan to reclaim public land and improve urban infrastructure in municipal areas, informed the Executive Officer, Jagatsinghpur Municipality.

Jagatsinghpur Collector J Sonal said, "We had conducted prior surveys and in-

formed the encroachers in advance to clear encroached land and avoid inconvenience. A meeting was held taking all stakeholders such as Bazar committees, local people, public representatives in civic body, MLA and revenue officials a month ago and the meeting had decided to clear the unauthorised roadside encroachments which is creating trouble in traffic movement and drainage system. Meanwhile we have followed all legal formalities before the eviction drive, as dedicated teams have been engaged to carry out the work and the process is continuing incident-free with public support."

Sources informed that these actions have been enforced on pedestrian walkways, removing unauthorised vending setups and makeshift shops adjoining roads in town to ensure unhindered public infrastructure access.

What Odisha's textbooks really teach us

DR SUBHASHREE DAS

Speed kills quality every time

Forget the Newton-as-pilot headline for a second. That one's funny in a grim way, and it'll keep getting quoted because it's the kind of error that writes its own punchline. But the more interesting story isn't any single mistake — it's what 1,678 of them, all happening at once, tell us about how we build public systems in this country when we're in a hurry.

Because that's really what happened in Odisha. Textbooks for Classes-I to VIII went out with wrong photographs, misplaced hills, a misspelled tribal community, a city demoted to a district, and — somehow — an Odia poem sitting inside an English textbook. Nearly 3 crore books, ₹

50 crore spent, and 50 lakh kids now stuck using material riddled with errors three months into the school year. Teachers caught almost 2,100 problems before the government even confirmed its own count. That's not a proofreading lapse. That's what happens when a deadline matters more than the work.

And here's the thing everyone already half-knows: these books were built in under a year, as an "experimental edition," to keep pace with the NEP 2020 rollout timeline. Nobody forced anyone to rush. It was a choice, made somewhere in the system, that hitting a date mattered more than getting Odisha's own geography right in an Odisha textbook.

The pattern is familiar, and that's the scary part

If you've watched how large public projects get executed in India — infrastructure, digi-

tization drives, welfare rollouts — this will feel familiar. A political timeline gets set. The people actually doing the work are handed an impossible window. Checks that exist on paper — drafting, review, editing, proofreading, final sign-off — get quietly skipped or rubber-stamped because there simply isn't time to do them properly. Nobody decides to cut corners; the corners get cut by default, because speed was the only variable anyone was really measuring against.

The inquiry into this mess more or less said as much: the mandatory checks were either bypassed or done half-heartedly, and the report calls it a systemic failure rather than a string of individual mistakes. That distinction matters. Firing four officials and starting proceedings against six more treats this like a personnel problem. It

isn't. You don't get 1,678 errors spread across 705 in Class 8 alone because a handful of people were careless. You get that because the entire pipeline was built to fail under time pressure, and nobody upstream asked whether the timeline itself was realistic.

There's also a detail that deserves more attention than it's gotten: parents' groups say some teachers used AI tools to help meet the deadline, and a lot of the errors — the odd factual swaps, the geographic mix-ups — do look like exactly the kind of thing an unsupervised AI tool produces. Nobody's confirmed this is what actually happened here, and it shouldn't be treated as proven. But it's genuinely useful as a warning, because it points at where things are heading. As more states race through the same NEP-driven curriculum overhaul on the same tight clocks, the tempta-

tion to lean on AI for speed is only going to grow. And if there's no rule yet about whether that's allowed, under what supervision, and who's on the hook when it goes wrong, we're going to see this exact story again — just with a different state's name on it.

Fixing this one state doesn't fix the habit

Odisha's now promising a proper cleanup: a four-stage proofreading process, a locked final version before anything gets printed, pilot testing, a public register of corrections. All good, all overdue. But notice what that list actually is — it's just the checklist that should have existed the first time. Adding it back after the damage is done isn't reform, it's a confession.

The real fix has to sit above the state level. The Ministry of Education and NCERT need to set an actual floor for how much time and how many

checks a textbook need before it reaches a classroom, and that floor needs to apply everywhere NEP reforms are being rolled out on a rushed clock — not just wherever the last scandal happened to break. Because right now, the incentive structure rewards states for hitting the deadline and quietly absorbing the fallout later, and that's a terrible trade to keep making with textbooks that reach 50 lakh children.

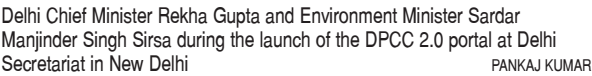
Kids in Odisha are going to spend most of this academic year working from books that got it wrong, waiting for corrections to physically arrive. That's the actual cost of choosing speed over care. Suspending a few officials doesn't undo that. What might actually prevent the next version of this story is someone, somewhere, finally admitting that the deadline was the problem, not just the proofreading.

(Educator and freelancer)

All construction sites over 500 sq yards to be monitored in real time through cameras and sensors

■ New Delhi

The Chief Minister said Delhi's fight against air pollution will not rely solely on stricter regulations but also on smart administrative systems. She said Dust Portal 2.0 will change the way dust at construction sites is monitored and managed, and that work is also underway to make the challan process completely digital so that



strengthen monitoring, and make enforcement more transparent. The data context for the portal is significant. According to Delhi Government figures, dust from roads, soil, and construction activities accounts for nearly 27 per cent of total air pollution in summer and aroper centpercent in winter. It contributes 66 percent of

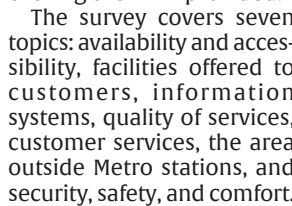
It will identify the nearest Air Quality Monitoring Station to each site and analyse site-level data. When pollution thresholds are crossed, the system will automatically trigger alerts to the concerned agencies. In

Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa said the portal has been under

Construction site dust has historically been one of the more difficult pollution sources to monitor and control in Delhi, given the large number of sites, the variable scale of activity, and the dependence on physical inspection by a limited number of enforcement personnel. By automating monitoring through continuous sensor data and camera feeds, the portal is designed to extend effective oversight to every registered site simultaneously rather than relying on periodic manual checks.

■ New Delhi

BRPL's approved rate remains unchanged at 17.94 percent from June to July,



■ New Delhi

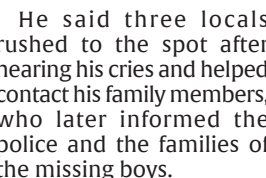
Dance trials, according to the schedule, are expected to be conducted at Bharati College, while debate trials are set to take place in Ramjas College. Quiz trials are scheduled for July 20 at Zakir Hussain Delhi College (evening), while Fine Arts trials will start the same day and continue for three to four days. Creative writing and instrumental music trials, along with digital media and divinity categories, will begin on July 21.

■ New Delhi

The accused, identified as Rahul alias Dhobi and Rahul Tomar alias Mota, both residents of Subhash Camp in Dakshinpuri, were arrested from Jahanpanah City Forest. Further investigation into the matter is underway.

■ New Delhi

"I told them not to go because the current was very strong. They were holding each other's hands while bathing. Suddenly, the current pulled them away. I started shouting for help," he said.



The clothes and slippers the teenagers had left on the rocks before entering the river remained untouched, watched over by relatives who clung to hope that the search would bring some news.

■ New Delhi

The National Film and

The AVGC-XR sector, which covers animation, visual effects, gaming, comics, and extended reality, is growing nationally at a compound annual growth rate of 16 to 17 percent. The Government of India's national roadmap identifies it as a sunrise sector with a projected requirement of nearly 20 lakh skilled professionals by 2030.

■ New Delhi

The scheme has previously been referred to as the

t is part of a broader category of direct cash transfer programmes for women that have been implemented or announced by several State Governments across India in recent years, including the Ladli Behna Yojana in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, the Gruha Lakshmi scheme in Karnataka, and the Orunodoi scheme in Assam. The monthly amount of ₹2,50,000 positions the Delhi Lakshmi Yojana within the mid-range of such schemes nationally.

The Raksha Bandhan target

The festival, which falls in August, provides a culturally resonant moment for the launch of a women's welfare scheme. It also sets a concrete deadline that will require the Government to complete beneficiary identification, eligibility verification, bank account linking and the initial payment cycle within approximately a month from the announcement of the finalised criteria.

The Chief Minister described women's empowerment as a key pillar of good governance for the Delhi government.

Implementation of direct benefit transfer schemes of this scale typically requires significant backend work including building the beneficiary database, verifying income and residency documentation, checking for criminal records, and identifying the eldest eligible woman in each family, all of which will need to be completed before the first disbursement can be made.



The Pioneer launches Keralam edition

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Thiruvananthapuram

The Pioneer marked a significant milestone in its journey with the launch of its Keralam edition at a function held at the Hycinth Hotel in Thiruvananthapuram on Monday evening, reaffirming the newspaper's commitment to credible, independent and impactful journalism in the State.

The Keralam Edition was formally inaugurated and released by Chief Minister VD Satheesan, who delivered the inaugural address, highlighting the vital role of a free, responsible and people-centric media in strengthening democracy.

"This is a time when we cannot say anything new," he said. "What we say is being twisted. We have to think very seriously about how it will affect society. But if we are convinced that what we do is right, then no matter what controversy comes up, the Government should go ahead and do it courageously. "The beauty of democracy is in discussion. We need to have positive discussions about the state, about the next generation, and about children. The media has a huge role to play in that," Satheesan added.



Keralam Chief Minister VD Satheesan releasing the Keralam edition of *The Pioneer* by handing it over to Deputy Speaker Shanimol Usman in Thiruvananthapuram on Monday. CPI State secretary Binoy Viswam, Kerala Home Minister Ramesh Chennithala, *The Pioneer* Keralam Editor Bandi Sudhakara Goud, *The Pioneer* group of newspapers and magazines Chairman Prashant Tewari, Gururatnam Jnana Tapasy and Palayalam Imam VP Suhaib Moulavi also graced the occasion

AV MUZAFAR

The inaugural copy of the edition was received by Deputy Speaker of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, Shanimol Usman.

Welcoming the gathering, J Gopikrishnan, Associated Editor of *The Pioneer*, New Delhi, outlined the newspaper's editorial vision and its commitment to delivering

accurate, balanced and public-interest journalism to readers in Kerala.

Presiding over the function, Bandi Sudhakara Goud, Managing Director and Editor of *The Pioneer* Keralam edition, described the launch in the Capital city as an important step in the publication's expansion and

reaffirmed its commitment to journalistic excellence, editorial independence and credible reporting.

Ramesh Chennithala, Minister for Home Affairs, Government of Kerala, attended the programme as the Guest of Honour and addressed the gathering. He appreciated *The Pioneer's*

decision to launch its Keralam edition. He recalled that *The Pioneer* carried out several turbulent stories in the country. He also recalled his decades-long friendship with Sudhakara Goud from the time when both of them were Youth Congress leaders. He wished the Pioneer to be a strong pres-

ence in the Kerala media landscape. He noted that it is only the print media that is willing to correct itself, whereas the visuals don't correct wrong news. Congress Media and Publicity Chairman and Rajya Sabha MP Pawan Kherra graced the occasion.

In his felicitation address, Prashant Tewari, Chairman & Managing Director of *The Pioneer* group of newspapers and magazines, New Delhi, congratulated the team on the launch of the Keralam Edition and conveyed his best wishes for its success, expressing confidence that the new edition would uphold *The Pioneer's* legacy of credible, independent and impactful journalism.

The function was also attended by several distinguished personalities, including Binoy Viswam, State Secretary of the CPI; Swami Gururethnam Jnana Thapaswi, General Secretary of Santhigiri Ashram; Dr VP Suhaib Maulavi, Imam of Palayam Juma Masjid; and KP Reji, State President of the Kerala Union of Working Journalists.

The programme commenced with a prayer and concluded with a vote of thanks proposed by Saritha S Balan, Deputy Bureau Chief, *The Pioneer*, Thiruvananthapuram.

Nation Focus



FADNAVIS MEETS PAWAN KALYAN IN MUMBAI HOSPITAL

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Monday visited Andhra Pradesh Deputy CM Pawan Kalyan at Mumbai's Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital where the latter is recovering after undergoing surgery. Fadnavis said he wished Kalyan a speedy and complete recovery. "Visited Andhra Pradesh DCM Pawan Kalyan ji at Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital in Mumbai, where he is recovering after a surgery. Wishing him a speedy and complete recovery," Fadnavis said in a post on X. In a statement on Sunday, the hospital said Kalyan was diagnosed with a right shoulder rotator cuff injury, comprising an extensive tear of the supraspinatus and infraspinatus tendon with an associated avulsion fracture of the greater tuberosity bone. He underwent successful arthroscopic repair of the injury at Kokilaben Hospital. (PTI)



MP GOVT PANEL ON UCC SUBMITS REPORT TO CHIEF MINISTER

The committee constituted to draft a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) for Madhya Pradesh has recommended exclusion of tribals from its scope in its report submitted to CM Mohan Yadav on Monday, an official statement said. The report of the Government-appointed multi-member panel, which was headed by retired SC Judge Ranjana Prakash Desai, has been forwarded to the Law Department, it said. After revision and process (consideration) of the Senior Secretary Committee, a bill on UCC is likely to be tabled in the Assembly during the upcoming monsoon session after approval by the Cabinet, said the statement. The five-day monsoon session of the State Assembly will be held from July 20. CM Yadav thanked all panel members, including the chairperson, for submitting the report within the stipulated time, said the statement. Committee members Prof Gopal Sharma, Budhpal Singh, Shobha Paithankar, and Member Secretary Ajay Katesaria were present. (PTI)

Centre approves ₹14,300 crore Budget for Puducherry



Puducherry CM Rangasamy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Puducherry

The Union Home Ministry has conveyed the Centre's approval of the Puducherry Government's proposal for a ₹14,300 crore Budget for the fiscal 2026-2027.

In a letter to the Chief Secretary of the Puducherry administration on Monday, the Under Secretary to the Home Department said the proposal was examined in consultation with the Finance Ministry.

He said the President of India had accordingly approved the laying of the annual financial statement for 2026-2027 before the Legislative Assembly of Puducherry.

The AINRC-Bharatiya Janata Party coalition Government was formed in May, in the wake of the Assembly polls on April 9. The Assembly is likely to meet later this month, when the budget for the new fiscal year will be presented by Chief Minister N Rangasamy, official sources said.

Row erupts as Govt plans to shift mosque inside NSI airport

SAUGAR SENGUPTA
■ Kolkata

There was political controversy after the Government suspended indefinitely the offering of *namaz* at Bakra Mosque (Gouripur Jame Masjid), which is situated inside the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport at Dum Dum in Kolkata.

Rejecting the Government's claim that a running mosque inside an international airport and barely a few hundred

metres from the runway with regular public access was a security concern, senior Trinamool Congress MP Sougato Roy on Monday said that he was always for doing things on the basis of consensus and not arbitrarily. "The fact is that they want to extend the runway... there is no question of security or safety ... If at all a change has to take place, then let it be on the basis of consensus and not by force as this BJP Government is doing it," Roy



said, while there was no statement from the Left.

West Bengal Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari had earlier said that it was indeed a

security concern and the mosque should be shifted from the area "because nowhere you will find a public place inside an airport and so near the run way... this is a security sensitive issue... remember we are near international border ... China and Bangladesh are nearby... an international airport which receives top VVIPs and dignitaries everyday besides handling scores of flights cannot be kept open like this for common entry... it has to be

shifted from there because national security is supreme... National security and the security of the airport will gain priority over everything else... I cannot say more as a Chief Minister."

Senior BJP leader and Union Minister Sukanta Majumdar too said that he had heard since his childhood that the runway of the airport could not be extended because the mosque came in the way. All this was because of appeasement politics.

3 BJP RS nominees file papers

SAUGAR SENGUPTA
■ Kolkata

Three BJP nominees, Sukhendu Shekhar Roy, Sushmita Dev and Prakash Chik Baraik, on Monday filed their nominations for the three Rajya Sabha seats from Bengal.

All three candidates were sitting Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha members but resigned their posts and left their party soon after the Bengal Assembly election results last May. The three leaders joined the BJP a couple of days ago.

Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari accompanied the BJP nominees to the returning officer's enclosure after they met him in his chamber in the Assembly.

While Roy refused comments regarding his quitting the TMC and joining the BJP,



saying it was not ideal for a candidate to talk when the model code was in effect. Dev, on the other hand, expressed his gratitude to the BJP leadership and offered to work for both Assam and Bengal because "I have connections in both the States." A caste Bengali Dev is from Assam.

On alleged discontent in the BJP rank and file over nominating three leaders

just after they left their party and joined the saffron outfit, Dev said she valued their grievances because "many of them sacrificed a lot for the party during their struggle against the TMC rule" and vowed to assuage their feelings. "I will try to work harder for the party and the people of Bengal... raise more issues so that I can justify my nomination," she said.

TMC accuses ED of targeting Opposition

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) on Monday alleged that the Enforcement Directorate (ED) is being used as a "political weapon" against opposition parties and questioned why the agency had not acted on allegations of financial irregularities in the Ram Temple Trust.

Addressing a press conference here, TMC leaders Sagarika Ghose and Mahua Moitra alleged that while the ED froze the bank accounts of Opposition parties, it failed to initiate action over allegations against the Ram Temple Trust.

"If the ED is truly impartial, why has it not acted in cases involving allegations against leaders in BJP-ruled States?...



If serious allegations have emerged against the Ram Temple Trust, why has the ED not initiated action? If such allegations had arisen in an Opposition-ruled State, the ED would have immediately registered a PMLA case," Ghose said.

Moitra reiterated the party's demand for a court-monitored investigation, saying millions of devotees donated to the temple in

good faith. "If the authorities can freeze the bank accounts of Opposition political parties, they should also be prepared to freeze the funds connected with the Ram Temple Trust while the allegations are investigated. There cannot be one standard for the Opposition and another for institutions associated with the ruling establishment," she said.

She alleged that if there had been any misuse of donations, "it is not merely financial wrongdoing — it is a betrayal of the faith of ordinary devotees."

Ghose alleged that constitutional institutions such as the Election Commission and the ED were being used to weaken the Opposition.

"The BJP wants to create a one-party state by eliminating every Opposition party... The ED is no longer functioning as an impartial agency. Since 2014, around 95 per cent of ED cases have been registered against opposition leaders," she claimed. Speaking on West Bengal politics, Moitra alleged that the BJP Government's implementation of welfare schemes would result in a sharp reduction in beneficiaries under the Lakshmir Bhandar scheme.

Jal Shakti ministry releases 3 key water management documents

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi



Union Jal Shakti Minister CR Patil

Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation under the Ministry of Jal Shakti, was chaired by Patil in the presence of Minister of State for Jal Shakti Raj Bhushan Choudhary.

Secretary of the department V L Kantha Rao, senior secretaries from all states and Union Territories, and officials of the Ministry of Jal Shakti attended the conference. Around 200 participants took part in the event.

The conference deliberated on eight priority agenda items, including the status of the Modernisation of Command Area Development and Water Management (M-CADWM) scheme, the special one-month nationwide Catch the Rain campaign, revised draft project appraisal guidelines for irrigation, multipurpose and flood management projects.

Ram Temple trust sets July 18 deadline for first CEO applications

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Ayodhya

The Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust has set July 18 as the deadline to submit applications for the position of the first chief executive officer (CEO) of the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

According to a post on X, the trust will accept applications until 4 pm on July 18. This appointment is significant as it follows allegations of embezzlement of temple donations, prompting the trust to create the CEO position to strengthen administrative and financial management.

The trust's notification states that the CEO will be appointed on a three-year contract, extendable based on satisfactory performance.

The position is based in Ayodhya. Salary and benefits will be determined through mutual discussion, as detailed by the trust on X.

Applicants must have at least a Bachelor's degree from a recognised university, be between 50 and 70 years old, and possess a minimum of 20 years of managerial experience in a



large public organisation, institution, Government department, or company.

Candidates should have experience overseeing administration, finance, accounts, human resources, public relations, information technology, security, and legal affairs.

"Preference will be given

to candidates who have served as Chief Administrative Officer or have experience managing a temple or Hindu religious institution. Retired officers who meet the eligibility criteria may also apply," it added.

The notification further stated that applicants must be

"actively practising Hindus," and that "being a devotee of Lord Ram belonging to the Vaishnava tradition will be considered desirable."

Candidates must have a working knowledge of both Hindi and English.

On Sunday, Ram Temple Construction Committee chairman Nripendra Mishra

stated that the trust will determine the responsibilities and powers of the first CEO, with no Government interference in the trust's or the CEO's operations.

"The primary responsibility of the CEO will be to uphold the faith of devotees in the trust," Mishra had told reporters.

He stated that the CEO will oversee the temple's financial arrangements, ensure necessary facilities for devotees visiting Ayodhya, and serve as an assistant to the trust while remaining accountable to it.

Mishra added that the trust will determine the extent of authority delegated to the CEO, who will be free to appoint necessary staff. At the same time, overall administration will remain under the trust's control.

The notification states that the CEO will report to the trust's general secretary and be responsible for statutory, administrative, and financial affairs.

The CEO will also oversee institutional systems, organisational development, regulatory compliance, transparency in financial transac-

tions, asset management, and implementation of policies approved by the Board of Trustees.

Key responsibilities include ensuring the smooth conduct of religious rituals, festivals, and ceremonies; maintaining security in coordination with local, State, and central authorities; ensuring the safety and convenience of pilgrims; arranging visits for dignitaries and saints; and strengthening the trust's reputation while promoting Sanatan traditions.

Earlier this month, the trust formed a three-member panel consisting of retired justice Pramod Kohli, retired Lieutenant General Vishnukant Chaturvedi, and former NIT Raipur chairperson Suresh Haware to review applications and recommend suitable candidates.

Mishra clarified that he will not be on the panel and will decide whether to attend the trust's July 22 meeting after reviewing the agenda. He stated that committee members associated with the temple's construction are ex officio members of the trust without voting rights.

States Focus

BJP slaps ₹100 cr defamation notice on Omar Abdullah



DMK SUBMITS HORSE-TRADING EVIDENCE TO TN GOVERNOR

DMK Organising Secretary RS Bharathi on Monday said that his party “submitted evidence on horse-trading in Tamil Nadu” to Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar. “The material evidence” included the statement made by MDMK chief Vaiko on the horse-trading of MLAs and a public remark by former AIADMK legislator MR Vijayabaskar, which were submitted to the Governor, Bharathi said. The evidence was submitted to DVAC as well to corroborate the systematic practice of horse-trading in the State, he added. “We submitted the evidence as supplementary to our complaint dated July 1, on the systematic practice of horse-trading by the ruling TVK,” Bharathi told reporters. The party had included the statement made by Vijayabaskar.

(PTI)



KARNATAKA TO SET UP 10,000 BHARAT JODO YUVA SANGHAS

Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister G Parameshwara on Monday said the Government has issued an order to establish 10,000 ‘Bharat Jodo Yuva Sanghas’ (youth clubs) statewide, aimed at boosting leadership, sports, culture, scientific temper and social harmony. This was among the first few initiatives announced by the DK Shivakumar-led Cabinet, soon after it took charge of governing the State on June 3. “We have issued an official order to establish 10,000 Bharat Jodo Yuva Sanghas across Gram Panchayats and urban wards to promote sports, culture, scientific temper and social harmony among young people,” Parameshwara posted on ‘X’. He said, “One Sangha will be formed in every Gram Panchayat; one for every 4,000 people in Town Panchayats; every 6,000 people in Municipalities; every 8,000 people in City Municipal Councils; and every 10,000 people within Municipal Corporation and GBA limits.” The initiative will be implemented by the Department of Youth Empowerment and Sports, with support from the Departments of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, Urban Development, Revenue and Education, he added.

(PTI)

MOHIT KANDHARI
■ Jammu

The Jammu and Kashmir unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Monday served a legal notice to Chief Minister Omar Abdullah demanding that he either substantiate or withdraw his serious allegations that the national party had attempted to bribe National Conference legislators with cash and ministerial berths in a bid to topple his Government.

The notice, which includes a demand for a written retraction and an unconditional public apology within seven days, threatens civil and criminal defamation proceedings, including a ₹100 crore damages suit, if the Chief Minister fails to comply.

In response to the legal notice, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah took a light-hearted yet defiant tone, calling the communication a “love letter” from the BJP.

Interacting with the media persons at the party head-

quarters in Srinagar, on the sidelines of a homage ceremony, Omar said that he felt “honoured” to be the only politician in Jammu and Kashmir to receive such attention, signalling that the notice only underscored his growing relevance as a political force the saffron party could not ignore.

The chief minister, while addressing National Conference (NC) workers at Hazratbal last week, alleged that the BJP is trying to bring down his Government by engineering a split in his party. He also claimed that an NC MLA from Jammu told him that he was offered ₹20-30 crore and a ministerial berth to switch sides to the saffron camp.

The notice has been issued through advocate Parimoksh Seth on the instructions of BJP J&K Unit president and Rajya Sabha MP Sat Paul Sharma. It contends that the chief minister’s statements have caused serious damage to the reputation and public standing of



Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah

the BJP and its office-bearers.

According to the three-page notice, Abdullah alleged that BJP functionaries had approached certain National Conference MLAs from the Jammu region with offers of ₹20–30 crore, ministerial berths and restoration of Statehood in an attempt to persuade them to switch allegiance to the BJP.

It refers to the chief minister’s allegation that a senior BJP office-bearer, who is also

a lawyer practising in the Supreme Court, allegedly played a role in offering the inducements. Rejecting the allegations, the BJP has described them as “entirely untrue, malicious and without any factual basis.”

The notice states that the allegations were deliberately made to tarnish the party’s image and have been widely circulated, thereby causing substantial reputational harm.

1,679 illegal immigrants sent back: Himanta

TONY DAS
■ Guwahati

More than 1,600 illegal immigrants from Bangladesh have been repatriated from Assam in the last two years, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Monday.

Replying to a question from AIUDF legislator Badruddin Ajmal, Sarma laid in the Assembly that the State follows the Central Government’s directives in the matter of citizenship, and enough safeguards have been ensured so that human rights violations do not take place while implementing laws in this regard.

“A total of 1,679 illegal immigrants have been repatriated (deported/sent back/expelled) from Assam to Bangladesh in the last two years,” Sarma, who also holds the Home and Political Department, said. Sharing the list in the



House, he said the repatriation took place between July 1, 2024 and June 30, 2026, after identification of the illegal immigrants.

While some of the illegal immigrants were ‘sent back’, others faced ‘expulsion’, while

a few were returned to their home country through the process of ‘deportation’.

Sarma said no identified illegal immigrant is repatriated if any appeal is pending in the High Court or the Supreme Court.

Asked about the procedure followed by the Government to ‘push back’ the infiltrators, the CM said that the subject of citizenship is a matter under the Central Government.

The State Government follows the existing provisions of law as well as the directions issued by the Centre from time to time while taking action against illegal immigrants.

The Assam Government does not deal directly with any other foreign country, bypassing the Centre, he said.

“The State Government implements the provisions of law as well as directions issued by the Centre pertaining to the citizenship matter. While implementing such laws and directions, enough safeguards are put in place so that the human rights of an individual are not violated,” Sarma added.

Ladakh to get hill councils for all 7 districts: Chief Secretary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Leh

The Union Territory Administration will constitute an Autonomous Hill Development Council (AHDC) in each of Ladakh’s seven districts, Chief Secretary Ashish Kundra announced on Monday.

The official described the move as a major step towards strengthening grassroots governance and balanced development across the region.

Ladakh moved from two districts to seven in April 2026, when Sham, Nubra, Changthang, Zaskar, and Drass were notified as new districts. Elected representation until now has remained with the two existing councils, one each in Leh and Kargil. “Ladakh Administration



Chief Secretary Ashish Kundra

has decided to constitute an Autonomous Hill Development Council in each of the seven districts. It is a major step towards democratic decentralisation and grassroots governance,” Kundra told reporters. He said Section 3(1) of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) Act already provides for a council for every district, to be constituted from a date the Government notifies in the Gazette.

Vietnam boat tragedy: Survivors slam lack of medical aid

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Hyderabad/Amaravati

Survivors of the Vietnam tourist boat tragedy expressed outrage over the absence of timely medical preparedness and trained personnel at the site of the accident that claimed several lives, saying they were forced to perform CPR in a desperate attempt to save fellow passengers pulled from the sea.

A total of 20 tourists from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana who survived the Vietnam boat tragedy arrived in Hyderabad on a flight late on Sunday after being repatriated from Vietnam.

A tourist speedboat carrying 32 Indian tourists, three crew members and an attendant capsized near Hon May Rut Ngoai off Phu Quoc Island on Saturday while returning to An Thoi Port in Vietnam. Fifteen Indian tourists were killed, and 21 others were rescued, with two survivors remaining in critical condition.

Govinda, a native of Rajahmundry and an employee of the mobile company that organised the trip, recounted the desperate moments on the island.



“There was no proper medical team on the island. We did whatever we could with the little knowledge we had. We performed CPR and tried to keep people alive, but many slipped away before our eyes. Had trained doctors, oxygen support and even basic emergency facilities been available, some of them could have survived,” he said.

According to him, 35 people were on board, and many were rescued from the sea, but there were no trained doctors on the island

to administer CPR or provide emergency treatment. He said the Boat’s crew, jet ski operators and members of their own group rushed to rescue passengers immediately after the vessel overturned. However, professional medical assistance arrived much later. “Everyone tried to help. We managed to save some people, but official medical help arrived much later. We requested an air ambulance, but were told one was not available. Ambulance boats

came only after some time, and the critically injured were shifted later,” he added.

Of the 29 tourists from Andhra Pradesh who were part of the trip, 26 survived while three lost their lives.

Govind was travelling in the second boat when the accident occurred about 400 metres away. “The first boat had already left while we were preparing to start. Suddenly, we saw it tilt before capsizing. We heard people screaming for help and rushed towards them immediately,” he said.

Quoting survivors from the capsized boat, he said strong waves forced the captain to slow down, triggering panic among the passengers.

As frightened passengers moved to one side, the boat became unstable, tilted further and eventually overturned.

“We ourselves tried to revive those who had stopped breathing. We saved one or two people, but many were in a critical condition. If qualified medical personnel had been there, at least five or six more lives might have been saved,” he said.

For many, the tragedy was deeply personal.

Govind shared the experience of watching his long-time associates perish. Among the three deceased from Andhra Pradesh were Sudheer, a businessman he had known for a decade and Jayalakshmi, the wife of Gelle Kishore, a close friend for 20 years.

“Watching people you have known for years die in front of you, while feeling completely helpless, is something I can never forget,” he said.

Harihar Srinivas, another survivor from West Godavari district, narrowly escaped the tragedy because he was waiting to board a separate boat nearby when the accident unfolded.

The ill-fated first boat had travelled barely 100 metres after leaving the island when the strong water currents caused it to tilt to one side and capsized.

“It all happened within moments. We could only watch in horror as the boat suddenly overturned,” said Srinivas, who witnessed the incident from a distance of around 100 metres.

Brewers body calls for Bihar liquor policy reset

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Brewers Association of India (BAI) has urged the Bihar Government to undertake a comprehensive review of the State’s liquor prohibition policy, arguing that the law has failed to eliminate alcohol consumption while creating severe social, economic and administrative consequences.

In a letter to Bihar Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary, BAI Director General Mr Vinod Giri has stated that Bihar stands at a critical policy crossroads and has an opportunity to replace “an ineffective prohibition model with a socially responsible and economically sustainable regulatory framework.”

BAI, the apex body representing India’s largest beer manufacturers, including AB InBev, Carlsberg and United Breweries, said the evidence accumulated over the last decade suggests that prohibition has merely shifted alcohol consumption from regulated and taxed channels to an underground and unregulated economy.



Representing India’s largest beer manufacturers, including AB InBev, Carlsberg and United Breweries, BAI pointed out that over 11.3 lakh cases have been registered and more than 17 lakh people have been arrested under prohibition laws since 2016, while illegal liquor seizures continue to rise year after year.

The Association argued that the policy has diverted enormous police and judicial resources toward enforcement while organised bootlegging networks have expanded across the State.

Calling the fiscal implications of prohibition “staggering”, BAI estimated that Bihar has foregone up to ₹60,000 crore in excise revenues over the last decade, in addition to losses suf-

fered by hospitality, tourism, logistics and ancillary industries.

BAI has proposed a phased and carefully regulated approach focused on moderation and harm reduction. Its recommendations include introduction of low-alcohol beverages such as beer and wine as the first step, limited rollout in urban areas and economic zones with good regulatory oversight, adoption of alcohol-content based taxation models to encourage lower-strength beverages, creation of dedicated funds for de-addiction programmes and rehabilitation services and mandating allocation of over 50 per cent of the factory floor jobs to women to support their economic empowerment amongst others.

Kerala: No rift with BJP leadership on Thazhamon issue, says KS Radhakrishnan

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Kochi

Senior BJP leader KS Radhakrishnan on Monday asserted that there was no rift between him and the party’s State leadership over his demand to end the hereditary claim of the Thazhamon family to the post of Tantri (chief priest) of the Sabarimala temple, saying the party’s stand was to protect the sanctity of temple traditions.

Responding to questions from the media on whether his remarks had put him at odds with the State leadership, Radhakrishnan said the BJP had a clear and consistent policy on safeguarding the ritual purity and customs of all temples.

“The BJP does not have a stand limited to any one temple. The party’s policy is



to protect the sanctity of traditions in all temples. Since the BJP has a strong and clear policy on temple affairs, there is no need to discuss such issues within the party every now and then,” he said.

Asked about BJP leaders visiting Sabarimala Tantri Kandararu Rajeevaru after he was released on bail in the Sabarimala gold loss case, Radhakrishnan said such visits were

made out of personal relationships.

“There may be personal relationships. Anyone may visit a person on that basis,” he said.

Reiterating his demand to end the hereditary practice, Radhakrishnan alleged that the present Tantri, Kandararu Rajeevaru, was an accused in two cases related to the Sabarimala gold loss incident.

He said the post of Tantri should not automatically pass from father to son and that only those who were qualified and competent should be appointed.

“The courts have observed that the sons of Tantris should be legitimately competent to hold the post. Tantric knowledge has to be systematically acquired. This is not family property to be inherited merely because the father held the post,” he said.



Karnataka Chief Minister DK Shivakumar

Charitable Endowments (Muzrai) Department across the State, following allegations of embezzlement of donations received at the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

“It has come to the notice of the authorities that incidents of theft from temple donation boxes (hundis) have been reported in various States across the

country and have been widely covered in different media,” the Government circular said.

“Further, cases of theft and misuse of cash and valuables during the counting of hundi collections and maintenance of accounts in temples under the jurisdiction of the Department of Religious Endowments in

the State have also been observed,” it said.

In this context, officials concerned have been directed to implement precautionary measures to protect movable assets belonging to temples across the State.

The measures include identifying suitable locations within temple premises, installing hundis in places clearly visible to the public, and providing adequate security. It is mandatory to install CCTV/web cameras covering the Hundis from all four directions.

The recorded footage shall be securely stored on a server. The CCTV feeds shall be monitored by the Muzrai section in the offices of the DC and sub-divisional officers.

India, Japan review defence ties at Tokyo policy dialogue

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

India and Japan on Monday reviewed the entire spectrum of their bilateral defence ties and discussed ways to deepen cooperation in emerging domains, including defence industrial collaboration, technological innovation, cyber security, space and other areas of shared strategic interest, the defence ministry said.

The key meeting followed soon after Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's visit to India from July 1 to 3 for the 16th India-Japan annual summit. It was Takaichi's first official visit to India. Giving details of the latest parleys, the defence ministry said the talks were held under the aegis of the 8th Defence Policy Dialogue in Tokyo. The Indian delegation was led by Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh, and the Japanese delegation was led by Vice Minister of Defence for International Affairs Kano Koji.

Both sides reviewed the significant progress made in bilateral defence cooperation since the previous Defence Policy Dialogue and reaffirmed their commitment to further strengthening the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership.

The two countries held comprehensive discussions



Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh, right, and Japan's Vice Minister of Defence for International Affairs, Kano Koji, during the 8th India-Japan Defence Policy Dialogue in Tokyo, Japan PTI

on the prevailing regional and global security environment and exchanged views on issues of mutual interest.

The dialogue reviewed the whole gamut of bilateral defence engagements, including military-to-military exchanges, co-operation between joint headquarters, maritime cooperation, defence exercises, capacity building, defence equipment and technology cooperation, including maritime technology, and enhanced institutional interactions.

Both sides welcomed the steady expansion of defence cooperation and underscored the importance of maintaining regular high-level exchanges and dia-

logue mechanisms. They discussed probable outcomes for the forthcoming Ministerial visits, including 2+2 later this year.

The two delegations also discussed ways to deepen cooperation in emerging domains, including defence industrial collaboration, technological innovation, cyber security, space, and other areas of shared strategic interest.

Both sides expressed satisfaction with the growing convergence between India and Japan on regional and global security issues and agreed to continue working closely in the Indo-Pacific. They reiterated their commitment to promoting a free, open and rules-based

Indo-Pacific region founded on respect for international law. Defence Secretary appreciated Japan's continued engagement with India in the defence sector and highlighted the importance of strengthening practical cooperation under the framework of the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership. Kano Koji reaffirmed Japan's commitment to further expanding defence ties with India across priority areas.

Earlier in the day, Defence Secretary called on Japanese Minister of Defence Shinjiro Koizumi, and conveyed greetings of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. Both sides reaffirmed the growing momentum of the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership. He also presented an invitation from the Raksha Mantri to the Defence Minister of Japan for his visit to India at the earliest opportunity.

Defence Secretary commenced his visit by laying a wreath at the Self-Defense Forces Memorial Stone in Tokyo, paying tribute to the members of the Japan Self-Defense Forces who have made the supreme sacrifice in the service of their nation.

The visit underscored the growing and deepening defence ties, mutual respect, and shared commitment of India and Japan towards peace, security, and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Varanasi gets reuse action plan for treated wastewater

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Varanasi has joined the list of cities with its own reuse action plan for safe reuse of treated wastewater, with the National Mission for Clean Ganga describing it as a "landmark" moment in India's journey towards the reuse of treated wastewater.

The action plan for Varanasi was unveiled by Union Jal Shakti Minister CR Patil at the water resources secretaries' conference in New Delhi on Monday in the presence of Minister of State for Jal Shakti Raj Bhushan Choudhary and Water Resources Secretary VL Kantha Rao. The Mission said the action plans show how the national framework on safe reuse of treated wastewater (SRTW) gets translated into ground reality. The plans map out exactly



where treated water can go, including thermal power plants, railways, urban landscaping and irrigation, matching supply from sewage treatment plants with real demand centres in each city.

"India generates approximately 72,368 million litres per day (MLD) of sewage every day from urban households. Only 44 per cent of that has treatment infrastructure, and much of what gets

treated is never reused. That's a resource going to waste, literally," the Mission said in a post on social media.

It said the SRTW initiative is a national push to stop treating used water as waste and start treating it as "Apna Jal" - "Our Water", a resource to be safely reused instead of freshwater.

The Mission said the national framework on SRTW, released in November 2022, lays the foundation through uniform quality standards, State-level policies, financing mechanisms and a shift from "treat-and-dispose" to "treat-and-reuse".

Noting that India is the world's 13th most water-stressed country, the Mission said groundwater is over-exploited across much of the country and "every drop of treated water reused is a drop of freshwater saved for drinking, farming and industry".

3 kids die of Chandipura virus in Gujarat

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Gandhinagar

Gujarat has reported seven confirmed cases of the Chandipura virus (CHPV) in the last few weeks, of which three patients have died, while four are under medical treatment, Health Minister Pratul Pansheriya said on Monday.

All the patients were under the age of 10, he said.

The minister, who chaired a high-level meeting in Gandhinagar to review the CHPV outbreak in the State,



surveillance operations, he maintained. The Chandipura virus causes fever, with symptoms similar to the flu, and acute encephalitis (inflammation of the brain). The pathogen is a member of the Vesiculovirus genus of the family Rhabdoviridae. It is transmitted by vectors like mosquitoes, ticks and sandflies. "Blood samples of 27 suspected patients of the virus were earlier sent for testing. Of these, reports of seven came back positive, while 12 tested negative," he informed.

Dry Gujarat logs over 300 alcohol-linked assault calls daily

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Ahmedabad

Despite Gujarat's long-standing prohibition policy, alcohol-related violence continues to place a significant burden on the State's emergency response system, with official data indicating that police receive more than 300 calls every day involving assaults linked to intoxicated individuals.

According to emergency response statistics for the period between September 1, 2025, and June 30, 2026, the State's 112 emergency helpline registered 83,747 alcohol-related assault incidents, making it the third most common category of police emergencies after general assault cases and public disturbances.

During the ten-month period, the emergency service handled 8.30 lakh police-related calls, averaging 2,741 calls per day.



Bihar CM launches subsidised heli-tourism service

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Patna

Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary on Monday launched the subsidised 'Bihar Heli-Tourism and Air Tourism Service Scheme-2026' to provide affordable air services to the public for select tourist destinations in the State. Bookings under the scheme commenced on Monday, while helicopter services will operate every Saturday and Sunday from July 18.

The scheme was launched at a function in the State Capital.

According to a statement by the Chief Minister's Office, "The CM launched the subsidised 'Bihar Heli-Tourism and Air Tourism Service Scheme-2026' to provide affordable air tourism services to the general public for select tourist destinations in the State. The initiative aims to establish Bihar on the global tourism map." Under the scheme, subsidised helicopter services have been introduced



Bihar Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary with others during the inauguration of Bihar Heli-Tourism and Air Tourism Service Scheme-2026 in Patna PTI

from Patna to Rajgir, Valmikinagar and Kaimur. The Government will provide a subsidy of up to ₹15,422 per ticket, the statement said.

"Expansion of the tourism sector will create new employment opportunities for local youth and promote

homestays, local handicrafts and rural tourism. Private investment in the tourism sector will be encouraged through the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model. The CM urged the people of Bihar to become ambassadors of the state's brand and

showcase its historical, cultural, religious and natural heritage to the world," the statement said.

He said no other State in the country has such an extensive network of quality rural roads as Bihar. Villages across the State are now equipped with essential infrastructure, including roads, electricity and water supply, he added.

He said Bihar was no longer known only for its rich history and spiritual heritage but was steadily emerging as a major destination for modern tourism. "Bihar is the land of Lord Buddha, Lord Mahavira, the world-renowned Nalanda University and the ancient Magadha Empire — a cradle of great civilisation and culture. The State Government aims to give these historical, religious and cultural heritage sites greater recognition at the national and international levels and attract more tourists to Bihar," he said.

Datia bypoll: Narottam back BJP candidate Ashutosh Tiwari

GIRISH SHARMA ■ Bhopal

The campaign for the Datia Assembly by-election gathered momentum on Monday as the BJP and Congress put up a show of strength during the filing of nominations by their candidates, while emotional appeals and sharp political exchanges dominated the day's events.

Former Madhya Pradesh Home Minister Narottam Mishra turned emotional while addressing a BJP public meeting, dismissing the Opposition's claims of divisions within the party. His voice choked with emotion as he pledged to campaign tirelessly for BJP candidate



BJP candidate Ashutosh Tiwari files his nomination papers in the presence of Madhya Pradesh CM Mohan Yadav and Narottam Mishra in Datia PTI

Ashutosh Tiwari. "Congress says there is a rift in the BJP. Look around, we are all standing together. I will bow before every household in Datia to ensure Ashutosh Tiwari's victory," Mishra said.

CM Mohan Yadav sought to reinforce the message of unity, saying, "Narottam, we are entrusting our younger brother Ashutosh Tiwari to you. It is now your responsibility to ensure his victory."

Taking a swipe at the Congress candidate, Mishra described Ghanshyam Singh, popularly known as Raja Saheb, as "an expired homoeopathy pill that may be sweet but has no effect." He also contrasted the two candidates, saying one was born into privilege while the other had dedicated his life to public service from a young age.

Earlier in the day, Congress nominee Ghanshyam Singh filed his nomination in the presence of Pradesh Congress Committee president Jitu Patwari, Leader of Opposition Umang Singhar, former Chief Minister Digvijaya Singh, former MLA Rajendra Bharti and Samajwadi Party State

president Manoj Yadav. Later, BJP candidate Ashutosh Tiwari submitted his nomination papers accompanied by CM Mohan Yadav, BJP State president Hemant Khandelwal, Narottam Mishra and other leaders. Nayak expressed disappointment over being denied the party ticket despite assurances after the 2023 Assembly elections. He alleged that the state leadership had repeatedly overlooked him and said all political options remained open. Nayak claimed that during a recent meeting, Digvijaya Singh had acknowledged positive feedback about him but expressed concerns over his past association with the

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and his proximity to BJP MP VD Sharma. "I have no issue with Congress candidate Ghanshyam Singh, but the state leadership has treated me unfairly. Ashutosh Tiwari is like my younger brother. I am still considering my future course of action," he said.

Addressing the Congress gathering, Digvijaya publicly apologised to Nayak, acknowledging that he had opposed Nayak's candidature in 2023 because he had only recently joined the Congress from the BJP. He praised Nayak's commitment during the previous Assembly election campaign and apologised if his actions had caused any hurt.

INS Sudarshini joins Grand Parade of Sails in Boston

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Indian Navy's sail training ship INS Sudarshini has taken part in the Grand Parade of Sails in Boston, days after representing the country at a grand nautical event hosted in the New York Harbour to mark the 250th anniversary of the US' independence.

The ship arrived in Boston on July 12, India's defence ministry said on Monday.

After her successful participation in the Sail 4th 250 celebrations in New York, INS Sudarshini took part in the Grand Parade of Sails, marking the commencement of Sail Boston 2026, it said in a statement. Raghuram Sastry, Consul General of India in Boston, embarked on the vessel for



Indian Naval Sail Training Ship (STS) INS Sudarshini participates in the grand parade of sails at Boston in USA PTI

the Grand Parade of Sails and the ship's ceremonial entry into Boston.

Sailing proudly with the Indian tricolour, INS Sudarshini passed prominent landmarks including Castle Island and the Seaport District before berthing at

Boston Fish Pier, the ministry said. "Joining an international fleet of over 60 tall ships from more than 20 nations, INS Sudarshini is representing India as a maritime ambassador of goodwill during her ongoing Lokayan 2026 transoceanic

expedition," it said. Lokayan 2026 is the ship's 10-month transoceanic expedition, which reflects the Indian Navy's commitment to strengthening maritime cooperation, building international goodwill and deepening engagement with partner navies.

Reinforcing the Indian Navy's commitment to maritime diplomacy, international goodwill and cultural exchange, the ship will remain open to visitors from July 12 to 15, the statement said. Following successful port calls at Norfolk, Baltimore, and New York, INS Sudarshini's participation in Sail Boston 2026 "further strengthens the growing India-US maritime partnership and showcases India's rich seafaring heritage on the global stage," it said.

TN CM visits Perambur, launches grievance app

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Chennai

In his first official engagement in Perambur after the Assembly election, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C Joseph Vijay formally opened his newly renovated MLA office on Monday.

He also unveiled a technology-driven public grievance mobile application specifically for Perambur residents.

The upgraded facility in Sharma Nagar First Street in Vyasarpadi includes a dedicated workspace for the CM, CCTV surveillance, and a 10-member staff tasked with managing daily public petitions, according to official sources.

CM Vijay contested and won from both the Perambur and Tiruchy East constituencies, eventually vacating the Tiruchy East seat to retain



Perambur. The MLA office also houses an integrated common service centre (E-Sevai maiyyam) to expedite civic requests. Meanwhile, the newly launched app allows citizens to directly submit and track complaints

related to electricity, water supply, roads, sanitation, and access to government welfare schemes.

He is also expected to launch the State's new ration card distribution scheme; the CM will inspect a ration shop

in MKB Nagar. He is scheduled to hand over new ration cards to the first 50 eligible beneficiaries, along with essential commodities and land ownership patts.

The schedule includes a visit to an MTC electric vehicle (EV) charging station near the Vyasarpadi Metro and a review of commuter amenities at a local MTC bus depot.

Coinciding with his visit, the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) has floated a Rs 48 lakh tender to prepare a comprehensive Detailed Project Report (DPR) for the constituency. The integrated area development plan aims to address long-standing urban challenges across Perambur's lower-income neighbourhoods, targeting flooding hotspots, drinking water issues, parking shortages, and the heavily polluted Captain Cotton Canal.



Editor's

TAKE

India finally arrives in the South Pacific

Prime Minister Modi's visit to New Zealand — the first by an Indian Prime Minister in four decades — resets bilateral ties after years of neglect

When Narendra Modi closed the final leg of a nine-day arc that began in Jakarta, in New Zealand, he did so by closing a much longer gap. No Indian Prime Minister had set foot in New Zealand in forty years; only Indira Gandhi in 1968 and Rajiv Gandhi in 1986 had come before him.

That the visit lasted barely a day, bookended by talks with Christopher Luxon and an address to the diaspora at Auckland's Spark Arena, only underlined how overdue it was.

The three-nation itinerary was not incidental. Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand together mark the arc of India's "Act East" outreach into the Indo-Pacific, a region where Delhi has spent a decade playing catch-up to China's economic and naval footprint. In Jakarta, Modi discussed heritage conservation at Prambanan; in Australia, the two countries struck a uranium export deal, feeding India's push towards 100 gigawatts of nuclear capacity by 2047.

New Zealand was the finale, smaller in scale but symbolically significant as the relationship's most underdeveloped corner. The challenges are real and long-standing. Trade talks, first launched in 2010, collapsed in 2015 over India's reluctance to open its dairy sector, to protect its millions of small farmers.

Even the Free Trade Agreement signed this April, ahead of Modi's visit, reflects that caution: bulk infant formula and select re-exports get duty-free access, but butter and cheese—the products New Zealand's dairy industry actually wants to sell—stay largely outside the deal, prompting open disappointment from its dairy lobby.

Separately, the presence of pro-Khalistan groups in New Zealand—including a 2024 referendum push by Sikhs for Justice that drew a formal protest from Delhi—remains a running irritant, echoing the friction that has strained India's ties with Canada. Against these frictions sit sturdier binding factors: a 200,000-strong Indian diaspora, growing convergence on Indo-Pacific maritime security, and a shared wariness of an assertive China across the Pacific. These pulled the two governments towards each other despite the trade impasse, and this visit turned that convergence into tangible outcomes. Modi and Luxon elevated the relationship to a strategic partnership and signed eighteen outcomes, including ten formal agreements: a four-year roadmap for cooperation, a reciprocal logistics support pact between the two navies, a maritime cooperation framework, and a pledge to jointly tackle transnational crime, from drug trafficking to cyber-enabled fraud.

They also set an aspirational target of doubling two-way trade to NZ\$7 billion by 2030. The real test now is follow-through. The FTA still needs ratification and entry into force, and its dairy carve-outs will keep testing New Zealand's patience unless Delhi shows more flexibility over time. And the defence commitments—naval exercises and cyber cooperation—need budgets and calendars behind them, not just communiqués.



BHOPINDER SINGH

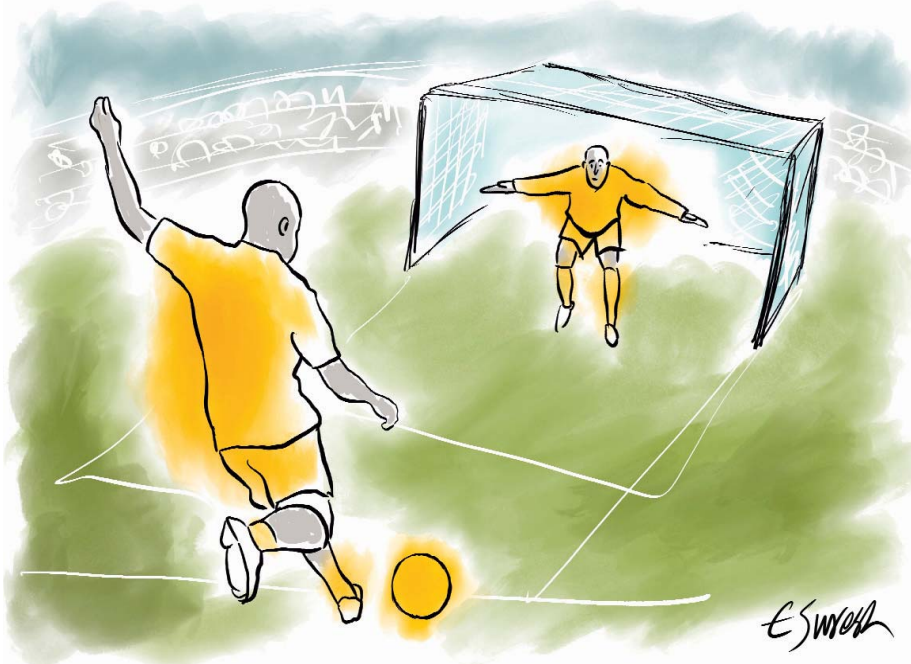
People of Moroccan origin constitute one of the largest immigrant-origin communities in the Netherlands, numbering approximately 450,000. For decades, the Moroccan-Dutch community has been at the centre of debates surrounding integration, identity and social cohesion. Issues such as religious extremism, youth unemployment, educational disadvantage, socio-economic segregation, and concerns about crime among a small minority of young men have received significant media and political attention.

Certain high-profile incidents intensified these debates. The 2004 assassination of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by Mohammed Bouyeri, a Dutch citizen of Moroccan descent with Islamist extremist motivations, and the exposure of the Hofstad Network (2002-2005), a jihadist group whose members were involved in extremist activities, became defining moments in Dutch discussions about radicalisation and integration. Although these cases involved a very small number of individuals, they contributed to public anxiety and provided political ammunition for right-wing movements, particularly the Party for Freedom (PVV), led by Geert Wilders, which has repeatedly argued that the Netherlands faces what it describes as a "Moroccan problem".

One of the most contentious issues arising from these debates has been dual nationality. Dutch law permits dual citizenship in certain circumstances, but nationalist politicians in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe have questioned whether it can create competing loyalties. Their argument is rooted in the belief that citizenship should represent an exclusive commitment to one nation and that full integration requires a primary and unambiguous national identity.

From this perspective, dual nationality may create situations in which individuals face conflicting obligations if the interests of their two countries diverge. Critics argue that, while dual nationals may legally pledge allegiance to the Netherlands, their emotional or cultural attachment may remain divided. They contend that a cohesive nation requires a shared civic identity and that multiple national affiliations may weaken that sense of belonging.

This debate resurfaced during the FIFA World Cup when Morocco defeated the Netherlands in a tense knockout match



THE QUESTION OF DUAL NATIONALITY REFLECTS A BROADER EUROPEAN DEBATE ABOUT BELONGING IN AN ERA OF MIGRATION AND GLOBALISATION

The writer is a former Lieutenant Governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry, and a military veteran

decided by a penalty shoot-out. The Moroccan national team, known as the Atlas Lions, has historically included many players from the global Moroccan diaspora. Meanwhile, the Dutch national team has long reflected the multicultural character of Dutch society, with legendary players of immigrant heritage such as Ruud Gullit, Frank Rijkaard, Clarence Seedorf and Patrick Kluivert.

The match highlighted a new dimension of the identity debate. Several members of Morocco's squad were born or raised in the Netherlands, including Noussair Mazraoui and Sofyan Amrabat, while others developed their careers within Dutch football structures. These players had eligibility options but ultimately chose to represent Morocco, the country associated with their family heritage.

There were undoubtedly sporting considerations involved. Morocco had established itself as a highly competitive international team, reaching the latter stages of major tournaments. A player's decision is influenced by many factors, including football opportunities, personal relationships, coaching environments and family connections.

Nevertheless, the symbolic significance of these choices was difficult to ignore. Ismael Saibari, closely associated with Dutch football through PSV Eindhoven, chose Morocco despite eligibility ties to Spain and Belgium. Explaining his decision, he said:

"Playing for Morocco was a choice from the heart." Similarly, Noussair Mazraoui explained that although he had discussions with Dutch coach Ronald Koeman, he had

already decided: "When I spoke with Ronald Koeman, I already had the feeling that I would choose only Morocco and nothing else."

For supporters of a more nationalist view of citizenship, such statements reinforce concerns about divided loyalties. Politicians such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, and Marine Le Pen in France argue that citizenship should involve a clear and primary allegiance to the nation-state. From this perspective, citizens born or raised in a country choosing to represent another nation because of their ancestral identity raises questions about national belonging.

Supporters of this view contend that a nation functions best when citizens share a strong civic identity. They argue that immigration and naturalisation policies should encourage newcomers and their descendants to develop a deep identification with their adopted country. However, critics argue that sporting representation should not be treated as a direct measure of civic loyalty. They point out that many people maintain multiple identities and that a connection to ancestral heritage does not necessarily diminish commitment to the country where someone lives, works and contributes to society.

The debate became more visible after Morocco's victory, when celebrations took place in several Dutch cities with large Moroccan-origin populations. Many were peaceful expressions of pride, though incidents of disorder and clashes with the police led to criticism and renewed discussion about integration and social cohesion.

Ultimately, the question of dual nationality reflects a broader European debate about belonging in an era of migration and globalisation. The challenge is finding a balance: allowing individuals to maintain their cultural heritage while ensuring a strong shared commitment to the civic values and institutions of the country they call home.

The responsibility rests on both sides. Host societies must create genuine opportunities for inclusion, while immigrant communities and their descendants must engage with and invest in the national identity of the societies in which they live. The future of multicultural democracies may depend on whether multiple identities can coexist alongside a common sense of citizenship.

PIC TALK



An artisan gives the final touches to an idol of Lord Jagannath ahead of the Rath Yatra festival in Nadia, West Bengal.

PHOTO: PTI

The infrastructure we cannot afford to ignore



SIDDHARTH ROY

2ND OPINION

Whenever a new highway, bridge or airport is inaugurated, it becomes a visible symbol of India's progress. Such projects inspire confidence because they represent ambition translated into reality. Yet, there is another kind of infrastructure that rarely attracts headlines, despite determining whether these physical assets ultimately succeed. It cannot be seen, photographed or inaugurated. It is the invisible infrastructure of trust, accountability and institutional integrity.

Every nation invests in roads, railways and power networks because they create economic opportunities and improve quality of life. India has made remarkable strides in this regard over the past decade. However, physical infrastructure alone cannot transform a country into a developed nation. The institutions that maintain these assets,

enforce standards and inspire public confidence are equally important. Without them, even the finest engineering achievements eventually lose their value.

Consider any public service. A modern hospital cannot deliver better outcomes if patients distrust its doctors or administration. Likewise, digital platforms remain underutilised if citizens fear data breaches, and universities cannot strengthen the economy if employers lose confidence in their graduates. Infrastructure functions best when people trust the systems behind it. India has already witnessed the power of invisible infrastructure. The success of Aadhaar, the Unified Payments Interface and DigiLocker depended not only on technology but also on citizens believing these platforms would make life simpler, safer and more reliable. Trust transformed innovation into mass adoption. The same principle extends to economic growth. Investors seek stable regulatory environments where contracts are honoured and policies remain predictable. Entrepreneurs take calculated risks when institutions uphold fairness. Citizens are more willing to pay taxes when they believe public resources are utilised responsibly. Even disaster management becomes more effective when communities trust official warnings and cooperate with the authorities. In each case, confidence acts as a multiplier that enhances the benefits of every physical investment. As a civil engineer, I have learned that no structure remains durable without a robust maintenance ecosystem. Designing a bridge is only the beginning. Its longevity depends upon quality inspections, transparent

procurement, timely repairs and professional accountability. These invisible processes rarely receive public attention, yet they determine whether infrastructure remains safe and functional for generations. The same principle applies to nation-building itself.

India's aspiration to become a developed country by 2047 therefore demands a broader understanding of infrastructure. Alongside highways, ports and industrial corridors, equal emphasis must be placed on judicial efficiency, ethical governance, administrative competence, quality education and professional standards. These investments may not produce dramatic photographs, but they generate something even more valuable: lasting public confidence.

Invisible infrastructure is not created by governments alone. Every honest public servant, responsible business leader, dedicated teacher and conscientious citizen contributes to an environment where trust flourishes. Development is sustained when institutions and individuals reinforce one another through integrity and accountability. Concrete may connect cities, but trust connects people. India's future will not be defined only by the kilometres of roads it builds or the skylines it transforms. It will ultimately be measured by the strength of the institutions that stand behind those achievements. That invisible infrastructure will decide whether our development remains impressive on paper or truly endures across generations.

The writer, a civil engineer, is a consultant at Rashtriya Raksha University under the Ministry of Home Affairs

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE



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INDIA'S RISING STRATEGIC INFLUENCE IN A VOLATILE WORLD

Appropos the front-page report, "JPC endorses One Nation, One Election" (12 July), the proposal deserves serious consideration as a major electoral reform. If implemented, holding simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies could significantly reduce the enormous expenditure incurred on frequent polls. Estimates suggest that savings to the national exchequer could be substantial, allowing greater public resources to be directed towards development and welfare.

The reform could also benefit political parties, which currently spend considerable time and resources preparing for successive elections across different states. A common electoral cycle may encourage parties to focus on long-term governance, present more meaningful vision documents and forge stronger alliances where

necessary. Smaller parties, too, would have the opportunity to contest elections more strategically instead of engaging in continuous campaign mode.

Frequent elections keep governments in campaign mode, slowing policy decisions and governance at both the Centre and in the states. Simultaneous elections could enhance political stability, improve governance and create a more favourable environment for economic growth and investment.

While constitutional, logistical and federal concerns must be addressed through consensus, the proposal has significant potential. If Parliament enacts the necessary legislation, *One Nation, One Election* could become a major step towards more efficient governance and a stronger democracy.

VINOD JOHRI | DELHI

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

Sleep is the foundation of good health

Refer 'The Healing Power of Sleep' by Rajyogi Brahma Kumar Nikunj Ji. The article rightly reminds readers that sleep is not wasted time but the body's most vital period of restoration and healing. Modern medical research increasingly confirms what ancient wisdom has long recognised — that quality sleep is indispensable for physical, mental and emotional well-being. The outdated belief that "sleep is for the weak" deserves to be discarded. Longevity expert Bryan Johnson aptly describes sleep as a superpower because no supplement, energy drink or productivity hack can compensate for chronic sleep deprivation. Sleep is second only to oxygen in sustaining human life. During sleep, the brain consolidates memories, strengthens learning, regulates emotions, repairs tissues, balances hormones, boosts immunity and removes harmful metabolic waste. People who consistently enjoy adequate sleep are more productive, make better decisions and are less vulnerable to obesity, diabetes, heart disease and dementia.

Educational institutions must also rethink practices that glorify sleeplessness. Daytime submission deadlines would serve academic objectives without compromising health. Sleep is not a luxury but the very foundation of lifelong health, happiness and productivity.

HARSH PAWARIA | ROHTAK

Strengthening public trust in the police

The controversy surrounding *Satluji*, the recently banned film inspired by the life of human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khaira, has generated widespread debate across Punjab. Despite the restrictions, many people have reportedly viewed the film through digital platforms. While some believe it highlights the alleged excesses committed by the Punjab Police during the militancy years, others argue that it pays inadequate attention to the horrific violence perpetrated by terrorists, resulting in a one-sided portrayal of a deeply painful period in the state's history. Sensitive subjects involving terrorism, human rights and law enforcement deserve balanced treatment, as selective narratives can reopen old wounds and influence public perceptions.

If the authorities found the film objectionable, such concerns should ideally have been addressed during the certification process rather than after its completion and release. The Punjab Police can strengthen public confidence by promoting transparent, accountable and humane policing, expanding community engagement and demonstrating unwavering respect for human rights. A professional police force that enjoys the trust of the people remains the strongest guarantee of peace, justice and lasting social harmony.

RS NARULA | PATIALA

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A voice that will echo forever

The demise of S Janaki Amma at the age of 88 marks the end of one of the most glorious chapters in Indian film music. For more than six decades, her extraordinary voice became the emotional heartbeat of millions, captivating listeners across generations with its remarkable range, versatility and expressive depth.

Whether rendering intricate classical compositions such as Singara Velane Deva, lively folk songs, playful comic numbers or even singing convincingly in a child's voice, she displayed a rare mastery that few singers have ever matched.

Her greatness lay not only in her vocal brilliance but also in her ability to transcend linguistic boundaries. Singing flawlessly in 18 languages, she became a beloved cultural icon across South India and beyond.

By declining the Padma Bhushan, believing the honour had come too late, she made a principled statement without diminishing her immense stature. She required no official recognition; the enduring love of her countless admirers had already crowned her. Though her voice has fallen silent, her immortal songs will continue to inspire generations.

S PADMANABHAN | KOCHI

Five water stories from Dhanbad that can shape Jharkhand’s water future

As climate change makes rainfall more erratic and water increasingly uncertain, Jharkhand’s next generation of water governance must move beyond delivering water schemes to securing water systems



EKLAVYA PRASAD

Dhanbad is rarely associated with water. It is known as India’s coal capital, a landscape of mines, industries and expanding urban settlements. Yet, beneath this industrial identity lies another Dhanbad, one where aquifers sustain millions, ponds continue to recharge groundwater, streams silently carry the burden of urbanisation, and communities negotiate water every single day.

Over the past several years, my work with Megh Pyne Abhiyan (MPA) across rural and urban Dhanbad has convinced me that the district is much more than a mining region. It is a microcosm of Jharkhand’s water realities. The challenges that emerge here—groundwater depletion, contamination, urban flooding, disappearing recharge spaces and climate uncertainty—mirror those confronting the rest of the State. At the same time, Dhanbad has also become a testing ground for innovative solutions. Five stories from the district offer valuable lessons for reimagining water governance in Jharkhand.

The first story comes from rural Dhanbad. Across the blocks of Baliapur, Tundi and Purbi (East) Tundi, covering seven gram panchayats and thirteen villages, MPA’s groundwater assessment found what villagers had always known: groundwater is the backbone of everyday life. It supports drinking water, household needs and agriculture. More importantly, the assessment revealed that local communities possess an intimate understanding of their aquifers. They know when hand pumps begin to fail, which ponds once recharged wells, how mining has altered drainage, and how rainfall has become increasingly unpredictable.

What was striking was that villagers did not merely describe problems. They proposed solutions. Rainwater harvesting, aquifer recharge, the revival of traditional ponds, improved irrigation and safe drinking water emerged as their priorities. Their responses remind us that groundwater governance cannot depend solely on engineering designs and hydrogeological maps. It must also recognise local knowledge as a valuable planning resource. Communities are not passive beneficiaries; they are indispensable partners in water management.

A very different story unfolds in Bartand, Dhanbad, inside my mother’s home, called Uttarayan. Since 2018, this residence has quietly become a living laboratory for understanding groundwater. Rainfall has been measured every day, rainwater harvesting carefully documented, and groundwater levels in a dug well systematically monitored. During this period, nearly 5.8 million litres of rainwater have been harvested to recharge the shallow aquifer, while seasonal groundwater fluctuations have improved by almost eleven feet between May 2018 and May 2026.

The significance of Uttarayan extends far beyond one household. It demonstrates that water consciousness begins with measurement, not assumptions. When people measure rainfall, monitor groundwater and observe recharge, conservation becomes evidence-based rather than symbolic. Imagine if every school, college, government office and public institution in Jharkhand became a similar water observatory. Such citizen-generated datasets would not only deepen scientific understanding but also strengthen the Government’s Catch the Rain campaign through informed public participation.

The third story shifts from one home to an entire city. It began with an inspiring initiative called the Gang of Twenty, a group of students from Carmel School, Dhanbad, who started engaging with local water issues. Their enthusiasm sparked wider conversations about groundwater and eventually contributed to Dhanbad being selected as one of the pilot cities under the National Institute of Urban Affairs’ Shallow Aquifer Management (SAM) programme. Implemented by the Dhanbad Municipal Corporation in partnership with MPA, and mentored by Dr Himanshu Kulkarni of ACWADAM, Pune, and S Vishwanath of Biome Environmental Trust, Bengaluru, the initiative marked an important shift in urban water planning.

Instead of viewing groundwater as an invisible reserve beneath the city, the pilot treated the shallow aquifer as an asset that could be mapped, monitored,



protected and recharged. Recharge interventions and groundwater monitoring were undertaken at Jeevan Jyoti School and Bera Colony in Dhanbad Circle, Bhagatdih and Neeche Mohalla in Jharia Circle, and Laxmi Colony in Sindri Circle. Subsequent monitoring showed encouraging improvements, with groundwater remaining available for longer periods during the summer months. The experience demonstrates that even rapidly growing mining cities can improve groundwater security when urban planning begins with the shallow aquifer rather than ending with pipelines.

Urban groundwater, however, cannot be protected without addressing sanitation. This is perhaps one of Dhanbad’s most important lessons. In the absence of underground sewerage systems, drains, streams and rivers frequently become carriers of sewage. Stormwater drains meant to convey rainwater gradually turn into wastewater channels, contaminating surface water and threatening groundwater quality.

The lesson is straightforward but often ignored. Water supply, drainage, sanitation, rivers and groundwater cannot be planned separately. Healthy drains, streams and wetlands are not vacant land waiting for development. They are essential urban infrastructure that supports recharge, reduces flooding and protects public health. Sustainable cities will emerge only when sanitation and groundwater are planned together.

The final story takes us back to rural Dhanbad, where the challenge is not water availability but water safety. In Gharbar Panchayat of Baliapur Block, studies conducted by MPA in collaboration with the School of Environmental Studies, Jadavpur University, found widespread fluoride contamination in groundwater. In several habitations, more than half of the drinking water sources exceeded the permissible fluoride limits. Significantly, this situation persisted even after piped water supply had reached many villages because people continued to depend on groundwater for convenience, reliability and everyday needs.

This experience reminds us that water security cannot be judged simply by counting household tap connections. Safe drinking water depends equally on water quality, continuous monitoring and informed community behaviour. Addressing fluorosis requires an integrated approach involving hydrogeological investigations, groundwater quality surveillance, safe alternative water sources, rainwater harvesting, aquifer recharge, nutrition, public awareness and institutional convergence. There is no single technological fix.

Taken together, these five stories point towards a larger shift that Jharkhand must embrace. Groundwater remains the invisible foundation of water security across rural and urban landscapes. Traditional ponds, dug wells, wetlands and drainage channels are not relics of the past but living ecological infrastructure. Water challenges differ from one landscape to another, making hydrogeology and local context central to planning. Most importantly, water quantity, water quality, sanitation, climate resilience and community participation are inseparable.

Dhanbad therefore offers Jharkhand something far more valuable than isolated stories. It provides evidence that a different model of water governance is possible, one that begins with understanding aquifers, respects community knowledge, encourages citizen science, integrates institutions and protects the ecological systems on which all water security ultimately depends. As climate change makes rainfall more erratic and water increasingly uncertain, Jharkhand’s next generation of water governance must move beyond delivering water schemes to securing water systems. If these lessons from Dhanbad are scaled thoughtfully, they can help build a State that is not merely water-supplied, but truly water-secure.

The writer is the Managing Trustee of Megh Pyne Abhiyan

The notion India needs to be Viksit Bharat



AMITABH RANJAN

India stands at a historic inflection point. It is the world’s fastest-growing major economy, a digital innovation leader, and a geopolitical force of increasing consequence. Yet the journey from a rising power to a truly developed nation cannot be measured through GDP figures or infrastructure statistics alone. The defining question is: what guiding principle will sustain India’s transformation into a Viksit Bharat by 2047? The answer lies in a simple but profound idea: Rashtra Pratham — Nation First.

Rashtra Pratham is not a slogan. It is a governing philosophy that places the long-term interests of the nation above sectional, political, institutional and personal considerations. Every successful nation in modern history—post-war Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Germany—achieved development only when governments, businesses and citizens aligned around a shared civilisational purpose. India’s ambition requires no less: a national consensus that transcends electoral cycles, ideological divisions and short-term interests.

Beyond economics: The character question

Development is not merely an economic phenomenon. A developed nation emerges when excellence becomes the norm rather than the exception. India has excelled in technology, medicine, entrepreneurship and public administration—yet the translation of individual excellence into institutional excellence has remained elusive. The challenge has never been the absence of talent; it has been the absence of a culture that consistently places national and institutional interests above narrow personal gains.

The consequences are visible across sectors. Bureaucratic inertia delays nationally important projects. Political polarisation obstructs reforms whose benefits transcend party lines. Academic institutions remain constrained by administrative rigidity. Corporate R&D investment stays below potential. Citizens demand better public services while overlooking civic responsibilities. In each case, the underlying challenge is not capability but orientation. A Rashtra Pratham mindset asks one consistent question: What serves the long-term interests of the nation?

Three arenas for Nation-First action

Consider innovation. India aspires to become a technological leader, with impressive achievements in space, digital infrastructure and pharmaceuticals. Yet national R&D expenditure remains well below that of leading innovation economies. Private capital gravitates towards low-risk investments; universities remain disconnected from industry; and regulation inadvertently discourages experimentation. A Rashtra Pratham approach would reframe innovation not as a commercial activity but as a national imperative, rewarding risk, strengthening academia-industry collaboration, and recognising scientific excellence as a patriotic contribution to nation-building. The same principle applies to governance. India’s administrative institutions have been the backbone of democratic continuity, but a twenty-first-century economy demands greater agility, transparency and outcome orientation. Administrative reforms must be understood not as an internal bureaucratic exercise but as a national priority. When governance improves, its benefits ripple across every sector—business, education, healthcare and social welfare alike.

Corporate India must equally recognise that wealth creation and nation-building are complementary, not competing, objectives. India’s entrepreneurs have built globally respected companies and a thriving start-up ecosystem. However, nations become developed not simply by borrowing technology but by creating it. The ensuing phase of development calls for wholehearted commitment to advanced manufacturing, deep-tech and long-term capital creation. Corporate India has the wherewithal to drive this transformation. It may appear difficult, but choosing to do so would be among the most meaningful expressions of Rashtra Pratham.

Citizens as nation-builders

No national transformation can succeed without people’s active participation and contribution. A developed nation is built by millions of everyday decisions made by ordinary people: respecting public spaces, following rules, paying taxes honestly, recognising merit, conserving resources and participating constructively in civic life. The difference between developed and developing societies more often lies in civic culture than in government policies. Viksit Bharat, therefore, demands not only institutional reforms but also a paradigm shift in civic consciousness.

There is also a deeper civilisational dimension here. India is not merely a modern nation-state; it is one of the world’s oldest continuing civilisations. Concepts such as Lokasangraha (welfare of society), Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah (well-being of all) and Yogakshema (collective prosperity) highlight the idea that the flourishing of an individual cannot be viewed separately from the development of society as a whole. Rashtra Pratham is therefore not a borrowed political doctrine but a contemporary expression of the civilisational ethic that has long shaped India’s global perspective.

Purpose over potential

India is sitting on unprecedented opportunities. Demographic strength, technological capability, entrepreneurial energy and cultural confidence have created conditions previous generations could hardly have imagined. Yet history is replete with nations that possessed immense potential but failed to fulfil it because collective purpose yielded to fragmented interests. The countries that succeeded were those that cultivated a shared commitment to national advancement. The journey to Viksit Bharat will not be completed by government schemes alone, nor by economic growth in isolation. It will be achieved only when every institution and every citizen internalises one conviction: that the nation’s long-term interests must remain paramount. That is the essence of Rashtra Pratham.

And the most enduring lesson of development is that nations become great not when they merely dream of prosperity but when they organise themselves around a purpose larger than themselves. For India, that purpose is clear: Rashtra Pratham — Nation First.



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AI and the vanishing first job: India’s emerging mobility challenge



RAVI POKHARNA

per cent of current work activities in the US, primarily within white-collar sectors, could be automated by 2030. Analysis by Anthropic (2026) and Stanford University (Brynjolfsson, Chandar and Chen; 2025) found that while AI-exposed occupations, such as computer programmers and customer service representatives, have not yet experienced significant rises in unemployment, hiring for younger workers in these roles has slowed measurably. This signals an important shift: firms are not eliminating jobs at scale, but they are reducing hiring at entry level. The layoffs may not come, but the offer letters may come more slowly.

The jobs are safe, the ladder is not

At first glance, India appears relatively insulated. Forty-three per cent of the workforce remains in agriculture, with large shares in construction (12 per cent), retail and transport (18 per cent)—sectors where physical presence and human judgement remain indispensable (PLFS, 2025). AI will not pour

concrete, repair a power line or manage a kirana counter anytime soon.

But India’s growth story has not been driven by these sectors alone. It has been powered by the steady expansion of formal services: IT-BPM, customer support, finance operations, analytics and the growing ecosystem of Global Capability Centres (GCCs). These sectors have historically functioned as engines of aspirational mobility, absorbing educated youth into formal employment. Yet these are precisely the domains where AI is now performing core tasks: writing code, handling customer interactions, processing data and managing workflows. The risk, therefore, is not where India is today, but where it is trying to go.

The most consequential shift is unfolding at the bottom of the pyramid. Entry-level roles in IT services, BPMs and analytics have traditionally operated as training pipelines. Firms hired fresh graduates with low initial productivity, invested in structured training, and scaled them into higher-value roles over time. AI is compressing this model. With AI assistants enabling developers to work faster and autonomous agents resolving most routine customer interactions, firms now require fewer entry-level workers to produce the same output. The result is not mass layoffs, but a structural decline in fresher hiring. In a country where 8-10 million individuals enter the workforce annually (World Bank, ILO), this is a systemic challenge.

Why this matters more for India

India’s youth labour market was already fragile before the AI transition. The graduate unemploy-



ment rate of 11.2 per cent is more than three times the overall unemployment rate of 3.1 per cent (PLFS, 2025). More than 45 per cent of employed graduates are overqualified for their roles (CMIE, India Skills Report 2025). Entry-level wages in IT-BPM have stagnated for over a decade, with starting salaries in the ₹3.5-4.5 lakh per annum range (TeamLease, 2024-25). AI risks amplifying all three trends: fewer formal-sector entry points, higher skill thresholds for hiring, and slower and more unequal wage progression. The first job is more than employment; it is an economic bridge. It shapes income trajectories, household aspirations and urban mobility. When that bridge narrows, the effects ripple across the economy. This is not a conventional jobs crisis; it is a mobility crisis.

A familiar technological moment

The advent of AI today is comparable to the arrival of computers in the late 20th century. Computers did not eliminate work; they transformed it. Every sector, every business and every activity

became computer-powered. Productivity surged, new industries emerged, and those who adapted gained disproportionately. India seized that moment. Tech services companies, in particular, helped position India as a global IT powerhouse. That wave created millions of jobs and gave India a competitive advantage in the global economy.

AI presents a similar inflection point, creating opportunities for India’s next generation of technology leaders to build for the world. But while AI opens new frontiers, it is also narrowing the entry ramp. For policymakers, the priority should be to incentivise entry-level hiring through apprenticeship-style schemes, tax credits or wage subsidies for firms hiring fresh graduates, while expanding the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) into white-collar sectors as part of a national “first job” guarantee.

Skilling policy must shift from degrees to task-level capability, moving beyond generic coding or AI literacy towards skills that complement AI (for example, problem framing, client management and domain expertise). Job creation must be accelerated in less AI-exposed, labour-intensive sectors such as healthcare, tourism, logistics and the green economy to absorb surplus educated labour. Finally, India needs a real-time labour market observatory that tracks hiring trends, wage movements and occupational demand. In addition to macroeconomic indicators such as the PLFS, high-frequency labour market intelligence is required. For businesses, the imperative is adaptation, not contraction. Firms should redesign entry-level roles by breaking jobs into AI-assist-

ed and human-critical components while retaining structured junior positions focused on judgement, coordination and client-facing tasks. This must be accompanied by institutionalising “AI + human” workflows, where employees are trained not just to use AI tools but also to supervise, validate and integrate them.

AI productivity gains must also be measured responsibly, avoiding their use purely as a cost-cutting lever and instead tracking whether adoption is strengthening or eroding organisational capabilities. Finally, deeper partnerships with academia are essential, including co-designing curricula, offering live projects and enabling early exposure to AI-integrated industry workflows.

AI is not eliminating work yet, but it is reshaping who gets access to it. The evidence from advanced economies offers India a narrow but valuable window. This disruption is not sudden; it is gradual, and it begins at the bottom of the ladder. By getting ahead of this curve through proactive policy, business adaptation and bold entrepreneurship, India can ensure AI augments its demographic dividend rather than renders it obsolete. The lesson from the IT revolution is clear: technological shifts reward early movers. This is the moment for the new-age Narayana Murthys to build the next generation of AI enterprises that serve the world while creating new career pathways for millions of jobseekers.

The writer is Executive Director, Pahle India Foundation. The article includes inputs from Kuntala Karkun, Senior Visiting Fellow, Pahle India Foundation

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Order Order

SC dismisses pleas of 360 Bengal madrassa teachers

The Supreme Court on Monday dismissed a batch of petitions filed by about 360 teaching and non-teaching staff of madrassas in West Bengal, challenging the denial of regularisation and payment under the State Government's grant-in-aid scheme.

A bench of Justices Dipankar Datta and A G Masih delivered the judgment after examining the cases of 13 petitioners out of more than 350 such employees to see whether any case was made out for grant of relief. Pronouncing the verdict, the bench said, "We proceeded on the basis that if any one of these 13 petitioners persuaded us to hold in his or her favour, we would examine the remaining cases as well. Unfortunately, none of the 13 petitioners could impress us."

Dismissing all the petitions, the bench said, "Therefore, we have not only rejected the claims of all 13 petitioners whose cases were scrutinised, but have also rejected the claims of all the remaining petitioners. All the writ petitions are devoid of merit and are accordingly dismissed." About 360 teaching and non-teaching staff employed in different madrassas of West Bengal filed around 48 petitions before the top court.

The dispute relates to the West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission Act, 2008, which created a statutory commission to recommend appointments of teachers in recognised madrassas. In 2014, the Calcutta High Court struck down the Act, a decision upheld by its division bench in 2015. However, the Supreme Court stayed the verdict in March 2016.

(PTI)

SC junks PIL on viewing pornography at public places

Observing that it was a policy issue, the Supreme Court on Monday junked a PIL seeking directions to the Centre to formulate a framework to prohibit the viewing of pornography at public places.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V Mohna dismissed the plea and asked the petitioner to approach the Government authorities with a representation.

"Undoubtedly, the issue raised is of paramount importance. However, the subject matter does not involve a question of law requiring examination by this court. It concerns policy issues which need technological advancement and expert consideration. Such issues fall within the domain of experts, especially the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology," the plea said.

The top court was hearing a plea filed by social worker B L Jain, represented by advocate Varun Thakur, seeking directions to formulate a national policy and draft an action plan to curb the viewing of pornography, especially by those not attained the age of majority, and to prohibit the viewing of pornographic material of any form at public places.

"The internet pornography statistics show shocking data, wherein every second, 5,000 porn sites are watched. More than 2 crore porn videos/porn clippings are being launched through the internet..." Under Section 69 A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, the respondents have the power to issue directions for blocking public access of any information through any computer resource," the plea said.

It contended that widespread availability of the internet has made pornographic content easily accessible, leading to excessive consumption and addiction.

Increasing consumption of such content has contributed to the commission of sexual offences, it claimed.

(PTI)

Patna court grants anticipatory bail to Khan Sir

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Patna

A court in Bihar's Patna on Monday granted anticipatory bail to educator Faisal Khan, popularly known as Khan Sir, in connection with the coaching institute firing case. Three staff members of the coaching institute also got anticipatory bail, Khan Sir's lawyer said.

The case relates to a firing incident that occurred in early June after a group of 15-20 people allegedly vandalised Khan Global Studies Institute in the State Capital on June 2 night and hurled stones at its premises.

His two security guards have been accused of firing in the air during the incident. Khan was named in an FIR related to the firing incident. "Six people have been granted bail. The judge first



announced Khan Sir's anticipatory bail, followed by that of his three staff members," lawyer Arvind Kumar Mouar told reporters.

The Patna Civil Court also granted bail to two security guards, who were arrested in connection with the case, he said. "We presented our arguments, and the Public Prosecutor (PP) opposed them. However, the police had already recorded the findings in the case diary



Airfares: SC asks Centre to place rules before it

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Monday asked the Centre to place before it within two weeks the rules framed under the Bharatiya Vayuyan Adhiniyam, 2024, which is aimed at modernising India's aviation sector. A bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta said the rules be placed before it in a sealed cover, irrespective of whether they have been placed before Parliament.

The apex court passed the order while hearing a plea filed by social activist S Laxminarayanan, who has sought a robust and independent regulator that ensures transparency and passenger protection across the civil aviation sector, and regulatory guidelines to control the "unpredictable fluctuations" in airfare and ancillary charges imposed by private airlines in India.

The counsel appearing for the Centre informed the bench that the draft rules are ready and they are in the process of translation.

He said the rules have to be

placed before Parliament. "We grant two weeks' time to the respondents to place before this court in a sealed cover the rules which have been framed, irrespective of the fact whether they are placed before the Houses of Parliament," the bench said.

Senior advocate Ravindra Srivastava, appearing for Laxminarayanan, said till the time the new rules come into effect, the old rules are operating.

Flagging the "exorbitant airfares" being charged, Srivastava said, "The solution is that this court must consider having a robust and effective regulatory mechanism which is independent."

The bench posted the matter for further hearing on August 3.

While hearing the plea on May 15, the apex court said there should be some rationalisation of airfares and asked the Centre to provide relief to flyers.

Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, who was then appearing for the Centre, told the bench that the new enactment of 2024 had come into effect in January



2025 and the corresponding rules were in the process of being prepared.

On November 17 last year, the top court sought responses from the Centre and others on Laxminarayanan's plea seeking a robust and independent regulator that ensures transparency and passenger protection across the civil aviation sector.

On February 23, the Centre told the apex court that the Ministry of Civil Aviation was actively considering the issues raised in the plea.

While hearing the matter in January, the top court

said it would interfere with the "unpredictable fluctuations" in airfares and flagged the exorbitant rise during festivals. The top court had termed the exorbitant rise in airfares by the airlines "exploitation", and asked the Centre and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) to file their replies on the plea.

The plea claimed that all private airlines have, without any credible justification, reduced the free check-in baggage allowance for economy class passengers from 25 kg to 15 kg, "thereby

converting what was earlier part of the ticketed service into a new revenue stream".

It said the "new policy of permitting only a single piece for check-in and the absence of any rebate, compensation or benefit to passengers who do not avail themselves of check-in baggage demonstrates the arbitrary and discriminatory nature of the measure".

The plea claimed that currently, no authority has the power to review or cap airfares or ancillary fees, allowing the airlines to exploit consumers through hidden

charges and unpredictable pricing. It also said the "unregulated, opaque and exploitative conduct of airlines manifesting in arbitrary fare hikes, unilateral reduction of services, absence of on-ground grievance redressal and unjustified dynamic pricing algorithms directly infringes upon citizens' fundamental rights to equality, freedom of movement and life with dignity".

The plea said the absence of regulatory safeguards results in arbitrary fare hikes, especially during festivals or weather disruptions, which disproportionately harm the poor and last-minute travellers.

It added that inaction by the state in regulating fare algorithms, cancellation policies, service continuity and grievance mechanisms constitutes a dereliction of its constitutional duty and calls for urgent judicial intervention. The plea also said that there is no rule to stop airlines from increasing prices based on demand and allowing them such freedom under essential services is unjustifiable.

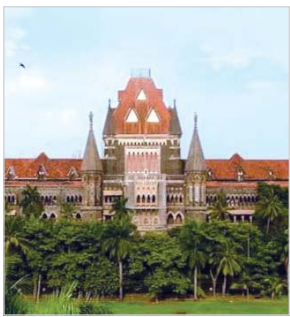
Police's illegal entry into woman's bedroom amounts to violation of privacy: Bombay HC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Mumbai

The police's forced entry into a woman's bedroom and seizure of her mobile phone without following legal procedures was an invasion of her privacy and dignity, the Bombay High Court observed, ordering the Maharashtra Government to pay compensation to a Nagpur resident.

The Nagpur bench, comprising Justices Umila Joshi Phalke and Nivedita Mehta, stated that the right to privacy is an integral and inseparable facet of the right to life and personal liberty guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution of India, which cannot be infringed.

A copy of the order passed last week was made available on Monday. The bench directed the state to pay ₹10,000 to the 26-year-old petitioner woman within two months, clarifying that the Government could recover the penalty amount directly



from the errant police officer responsible.

"Entry into the residential premises of a citizen, more particularly into the bedroom occupied by a woman, without adherence to the statutory safeguards and forcible seizure of her mobile phone constitutes a serious invasion of privacy and dignity," the court said.

Dismissing the police's contention that the search was undertaken as part of a probe into an offence, the court said this cannot justify a departure from the mandatory safeguards enacted by the

legislature. The investigating agency is expected to act strictly within the bounds of law, and the object of investigation cannot legitimise an otherwise illegal search or seizure, it said.

The bench concluded that the search conducted by the concerned police official and the seizure of the petitioner's mobile phone were illegal and violated her fundamental rights. Hence, she was entitled to compensation.

It further held that although monetary compensation cannot fully redress the invasion of privacy and dignity suffered by the woman, it would provide some measure of solace for the violation of her constitutional rights and serve as a reminder that investigative powers must be exercised strictly in accordance with law and not arbitrarily.

The petitioner, a resident of Saoner in Nagpur, claimed that the police illegally entered her residence, her

bedroom, under the garb of investigating a case and seized her mobile phone without following the statutory procedure laid down by law. The police had claimed that they had visited the petitioner's house to question her in connection with a car accident.

The woman, in her plea, alleged that the police had harassed her and her husband by visiting their residence repeatedly for questioning without issuance of notice and illegally seized and retained her mobile phone for two days without following the procedure prescribed under the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNS).

The woman claimed that neither she nor her husband has been named as an accused in the case. The court, in its order, noted that in the present case, there has been a clear non-compliance with the statutory requirements of law.

SC stays Madras HC order on cow slaughter



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Monday stayed a Madras High Court order which directed the Tamil Nadu Government to ensure that no cow or calf is slaughtered on the eve of Bakrid or on any other day.

"We allow this writ petition with a direction to the state of Tamil Nadu to ensure that no cow or calf is slaughtered on the eve of Bakrid or on any other day," the high court had said.

In its petition, the state Government termed the order contrary to the Tamil Nadu Animal Preservation Act, 1958. The Act permits the slaughter of cows aged over 10 years that are unfit for work and breeding, on the basis of a certificate issued by a competent authority.

court, which directed the state authorities to ensure that no cow or calf is slaughtered across the state either on the eve of Bakrid or on any other day.

"We allow this writ petition with a direction to the state of Tamil Nadu to ensure that no cow or calf is slaughtered on the eve of Bakrid or on any other day," the high court had said.

In its petition, the state Government termed the order contrary to the Tamil Nadu Animal Preservation Act, 1958. The Act permits the slaughter of cows aged over 10 years that are unfit for work and breeding, on the basis of a certificate issued by a competent authority.

SC to hear pleas against MP High Court verdict on Bhojshala complex

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Monday agreed to list for hearing a batch of appeals challenging a Madhya Pradesh High Court order, which said the disputed Bhojshala complex in Dhar district was a temple dedicated to Goddess Saraswati.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V Mohna was urged by senior advocate Huzefa Ahmadi and advocate Nizam Pasha, appearing for Muslim appellants, that the pleas needed to be heard on an urgent basis.

The CJI asked the counsel for the appellants to remove defects from the petitions and assured them that they will be listed for hearing

before a bench soon. On May 15, the Madhya Pradesh High Court ruled that the disputed Bhojshala-Kamal Maula Mosque complex in Dhar district is a temple dedicated to Goddess Saraswati. It simultaneously quashed a decades-old ASI order that had allowed the Muslim community to offer Friday prayers at the site.

The high court had also said that the Centre and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) can decide on the Bhojshala complex's administration and management.

The Hindu community considers Bhojshala a temple dedicated to Goddess Saraswati, while the Muslim side calls the 11th-century monument the Kamal Maula Mosque. The disputed complex is protected by the ASI. The Muslim side has filed



appeals against the high court verdict.

Hindu parties have filed caveats in the Supreme Court, saying no orders be passed without hearing it on any appeal against the high court order in the Bhojshala complex dispute case. The high court's division bench of Justices Vijay Kumar Shukla and Alok Awasthi, in its judge-

ment, had said the religious character of the 11th-century monument was based on scientific evidence. The high court clarified that the Muslim side may approach the MP Government for separate land in the district to construct a mosque.

"The religious character of disputed area of the Bhojshala Complex and

Kamal Maula Mosque is held to be a Bhojshala with a temple of goddess Vagdevi (Saraswati)," the bench said in its order and also ordered that the area of Bhojshala "is held to be a protected monument" under 1958 Act with effect from March 3, 1904. Directing that the ASI shall have full supervisory control over the preservation, conservation and regulation of religious access, the court asked the Centre and the ASI to take a decision for the purpose of administration and management of the affairs of the Bhojshala temple and Sanskrit learning.

The high court had said the central Government "may consider" representations of some of the petitioners to bring back the 'Pratima' (idol) of Goddess Saraswati from the

London Museum and re-establish the same within the complex. This order nullified the April 2003 ASI order that permitted Hindus to worship on Tuesdays and Muslims to offer *namaz* on Fridays.

The high court's order had a mention about the background and legal arguments surrounding the Ayodhya dispute as many petitioners referred to the Supreme Court judgement. The court also asked the Madhya Pradesh Government to consider a plea from the petitioners for allocation of a land in Dhar district for construction of a mosque.

The court said from the archaeological and historical facts it is "crystal clear that the building in question is a Hindu temple and place of learning of Sanskrit language".

3 chargesheets filed in 7 ADAG FIRs: CBI tells SC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The CBI on Monday told the Supreme Court that it has filed three chargesheets in as many cases out of the total seven FIRs concerning alleged large-scale banking fraud involving Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group and its firms.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V Mohna was told by Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for CBI, that the investigation in the other four cases was underway. The top court took note of the submission by Mehta and directed the CBI to file a status report on the progress in the investigation.

It also recorded that the Enforcement Directorate has also filed a prosecution



report, equivalent to a chargesheet, in related money laundering cases.

During the hearing, advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for the petitioner, former bureaucrat EAS Sarma, alleged that the kingpin Anil Ambani has not been arrested so far in the cases. He said though three chargesheets were filed

by June, the CBI has not filed any status report in the matter.

Bhushan submitted that though SEBI mentioned the "pivotal" role of Anil Ambani, there is nothing disclosed in the status report filed by CBI. He alleged that no action has been taken against Anil Ambani and only relatively lowly officers have been arrested.

"I am saying they should disclose to your lordships what they have found about his role. In a 2025 chargesheet, the CBI says he was kingpin. SEBI says he was kingpin," Bhushan said.

Solicitor General refuted Bhushan's submission and told the court that it is wrong to say that only lowly officers have been arrested.

Even managing directors and executives have been arrested, he said. The top

court said it would not be fair to direct anything and asked Bhushan to go through the chargesheet about the role attributed to Anil Ambani. Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for Anil Ambani, submitted that such a comment itself will cause prejudice to his party. "Once a chargesheet is filed, cognisance is yet to be taken. This is not the procedure this court has ever followed," Sibal said.

The top court said it was conscious that nothing should come from the bench which can be prejudicial to the parties.

Mehta, appearing for agencies, had earlier told the court that there are a total of nine FIRs, out of which seven are under investigation. "In the seven cases, the total loss caused is ₹27,337 crore," he had said.

PIOTECH

Truecaller row: TRAI seeks power under IT Act to act

Telecom regulator TRAI has sought to be designated as an 'authorised agency' under the IT Act, a status that would allow it to act against call management apps, and the matter is now being examined by the IT Ministry, according to sources.

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) on Friday had asserted that no app can block phone calls originating from 1600 number series that are meant for communications by regulated entities and the Government to citizens.

TRAI's assertions had come amid an ongoing tussle with caller identification app Truecaller over the labelling and identification of calls from the dedicated number series.

On Monday, officials in MeitY (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology) said that the issue of regulatory jurisdiction is a technical one.

"Under the IT Act, there are rules as to some agencies that are authorised to take action, like the Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre (I4C), etc., so that is done by the appropriate Government. So the question is who is the appropriate Government to authorise TRAI... Department of Telecom (DoT) believes it is MeitY and MeitY says it will examine and take a call," the official said, adding that the IT Ministry is not looking at the Truecaller issue per se. (PTI)

Flipkart says West Bengal to remain key investment hub



Flipkart on Monday said it would deepen its long-term investments in West Bengal, expanding its supply chain infrastructure, seller ecosystem and skills initiatives in the State, which houses the company's largest fulfilment centre in India.

The Walmart-owned e-commerce company said West Bengal is home to its largest fulfilment and logistics hub, located at Haringhata, and remains central to its long-term growth strategy.

The Haringhata campus has a storage capacity of 5 million cubic feet across six mezzanine levels and features automated storage and retrieval systems, robotic packaging arms, cross-belt sorters and a nine-kilometre conveyor network.

Flipkart said the facility is the first e-commerce fulfilment centre of its scale in India to receive the Indian Green Building Council's Platinum certification.

Across West Bengal, the company operates more than 300 fulfilment centres, mother hubs and last-mile delivery facilities, supporting more than 120,000 direct and indirect jobs across operations, technology, delivery and support functions.

The company said it also creates thousands of seasonal jobs during its annual Big Billion Days sale.

Flipkart has expanded its quick commerce business, Flipkart Minutes, in the state with 90 micro fulfilment centres, creating close to 10,000 employment opportunities. The company added that its sourcing network includes more than 500 farmers from West Bengal supplying fresh fruits and vegetables.

"West Bengal has long been one of India's great centres of enterprise, innovation and craftsmanship. Today, it is also emerging as a key hub for digital commerce. At Flipkart, we are proud to be a long-term partner in the State's growth journey. Our investments in infrastructure, technology and supply chains are creating jobs, empowering MSMEs, supporting farmers and enabling thousands of entrepreneurs to access markets across India. As home to our largest fulfilment centre in the country, West Bengal will continue to play a pivotal role in Flipkart's growth, and we remain committed to investing in the State's people, businesses and long-term potential," said Kalyan Krishnamurthy, Chief Executive Officer, Flipkart Group. (PTI)

Rajnath Singh: AI cannot replace human compassion

Artificial Intelligence is bringing rapid progress in medical sciences, but it cannot replace human compassion, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said on Monday, urging budding doctors to work with empathy towards patients and their families.

Addressing the 22nd convocation ceremony of King George's Medical University in his Lok Sabha constituency, Lucknow, the minister said new technologies such as artificial intelligence, synthetic biology, gene editing and precision medicine are transforming both the direction and the landscape of healthcare. Therefore, doctors must always continue the process of learning, he said. "Medical science is evolving rapidly today... Today is the era of Artificial Intelligence. No field remains untouched by it, including your own. "Yet, Artificial Intelligence cannot assure a mother that her child will recover (from illness). It cannot hold the hand of an elderly person, and say, 'Do not worry; we will set everything right'.

"Technology can be intelligent, but it cannot be compassionate. It can read medical charts, but it cannot, under any circumstances, understand the pain in a patient's mind," Rajnath Singh said. "Hence, you have to work with empathy and compassion."

The minister said that saving a life is the "highest duty. Fulfilling this duty does not always require vast resources or institutional support; all that is needed is sensitivity and firm resolve. "If one holds the feeling that saving a life is the supreme duty, then circumstances never become an obstacle," the minister said. (PTI)

The username wars: India's small fight over a very big question

The Government is asking why citizens should be allowed to talk without sharing phone numbers. In a democracy, that question runs the other way



NISHANT SAHDEV

Sometime on July 2, a letter left the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology carrying one of the strangest regulatory questions ever put to a technology company. Addressed to Telegram and Signal, it asked, in essence: why should Indians be allowed to talk to each other without exchanging phone numbers?

Strip away the legal language and that is the whole dispute. Not encryption. Not national security. A handle - a string of characters beginning with @ - that lets a woman message a stranger on a marketplace without handing over the number that rings in her pocket at midnight.

The sequence tells its own story. On July 1, WhatsApp was ordered to pause the rollout of its optional username feature until the Government was "satisfied" with its safeguards. Within a day, notices reached Telegram and Signal demanding they justify features they have offered for years - Telegram since 2014, Signal since 2024. Zoho's homegrown app Arattai did not wait to argue; it announced it would simply switch its usernames off. In forty-eight hours, a design choice made independently by four companies on four continents became a matter requiring explanation in New Delhi. None of the notices has been made public. Citizens are learning what their Government demands of their communication tools through press leaks.

To see what is actually at stake, rewind nine days. On June 23, the Government notified the authorisation rules under the Telecommunications Act, 2023 — the statute that finally retires the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 and the Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1933. The word "licence" vanishes from Indian telecom law after 141 years; "authorisation" replaces it, applications now flow through a digital portal, and a colonial framework written for a world in which the state owned the copper wire is gone. This is genuine, overdue modernisation, and the Government deserves credit for it.

But the new law carries a definition with enormous gravitational pull. It describes telecommunication in technology-neutral terms — the transmission of messages by wire, radio, optical or other electro-magnetic systems.

Lawyers have warned that this language is broad enough to pull internet messaging apps into the telecom net whenever the Government chooses to notify them. Read against that backdrop, the username notices



are not a stray consumer-protection exercise. They are a sound-line, dropped to measure how far the new perimeter can reach. Here, a little engineering honesty would rescue the debate, because the public conversation has collapsed two very different things into one: an identifier and an identity.

A username is not a cloak of invisibility. It is a pointer - a human-readable label that a server translates into an account, exactly as the internet's address book translates "thepioneer.com" into a string of numbers. On an end-to-end encrypted platform, the message itself is unreadable to everyone except sender and recipient, whether it was addressed to a phone number or a handle. Banning usernames decrypts nothing. Permitting them encrypts nothing. The mathematics is serenely indifferent to what you call yourself.

What a username does disturb is an arrangement the Indian state has quietly enjoyed for two decades. Every SIM card in this country is issued against verified identity documents. When your messaging account is welded to your mobile number, the state inherits — free of charge, without passing a single law — a chain of custody linking every conversation to a KYC-verified human being. Usernames loosen that weld. That, not fraud, is the deeper anxiety, and we should have the honesty to debate it as what it is: a question about how much anonymity a free society owes its citizens, not a squabble over an app setting.

The fraud concern is real, and it deserves respect rather than dismissal. Digital arrest scams, phishing and impersonation have



exploded. A Ministry of Home Affairs cyber-crime report, submitted to the Delhi High Court, reportedly logged over 6.8 lakh Telegram-linked complaints with losses exceeding ₹71,000 crore. Telegram - banned for a week in June ahead of the NEET-UG re-examination over paper-leak fears - has earned much of its scrutiny.

But a remedy must connect to the disease, and here the engineering refuses to cooperate with the politics. The overwhelming majority of scam calls and messages in India arrive today through phone numbers - spoofed, virtual, international, or procured on forged documents. Two decades of KYC-verified SIMs have not stopped them. If verified numbers cannot stop number-based fraud, it is magical thinking to believe unverified fraud will stop because usernames were banned. Criminals route around identifiers; that is practically their job description. Meanwhile, the people usernames genuinely protect are exactly those the state claims to champion: women dodging stalkers, journalists shielding sources, doctors and teachers who must be reachable without surrendering a personal number to a thousand strangers. Signal designed its usernames to be invisible by default for precisely this reason — the feature exists to shrink the personal data a conversation exposes, not enlarge it.

There is also a rule-of-law problem that should worry us even if the technology bores us. Digital rights groups, including SFLC.in, have pointed out that neither the Information Technology Act nor its rules create any prior-approval regime under which platforms must seek permission

before shipping a feature — and have demanded the ministry publish the notices and cite their legal basis. Analysts see the real lever: Section 79 of the IT Act, the safe-harbour provision meant to shield intermediaries, being quietly brandished as a threat. When software features require a nod from a ministry, delivered through unpublished letters, we have not regulated technology. We have built a permission raj for code.

India, of all nations, should recognise the superior alternative, because India invented it. We did not fight payment fraud by banning UPI handles - which are, let us be honest, usernames for money. We engineered trust into the rails: the beneficiary's verified name appears before you pay, limits cap the damage, grievance systems run in public view. UPI now moves billions of transactions a month precisely because identity assurance was built into the architecture rather than bolted on through prohibition. The same template fits messaging: enforce rapid, due-process responses to law-enforcement requests; mandate proactive impersonation detection; hold grievance officers personally accountable; require public transparency reports. Regulate outcomes. Leave the architecture alone.

The new telecom rules themselves mark the boundary the Government is now blurring. They require carriers to store network logs in India and route satellite traffic through Indian gateways — defensible sovereignty measures aimed at companies occupying spectrum, a genuinely scarce public resource. But an app is not a carrier, any more than a conversation is a highway because it happened in a moving car. The 1885 Telegraph Act conflated the message with the wire because, in 1885, the state owned both. The 2023 Act was written to end that confusion. It would be a bitter irony if its first real-world test smuggled the Victorian instinct back in digital clothing.

Which brings us back to the question in that July 2 letter — why should you be allowed to offer usernames? and to the quiet scandal inside it. The burden of proof is upside down. In a constitutional democracy, citizens do not petition the state for permission to speak without disclosing a phone number; the state must justify why they cannot. India is building the most ambitious digital public infrastructure on earth, and its credibility rests on one proposition: that we govern technology through law, in the open - not through the leverage of letters no one is allowed to read. On that proposition, this very small fight over a very small feature has become a very large test.

(The writer is a physicist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a columnist on AI, infrastructure and global systems)

We taught machines our paperwork - Now they are judging us

India built the World's biggest trust machine. Can It survive AI?



PRAVIN KAUSHAL

Somewhere today, a loan is approved, a university seat allotted, a bail application weighed. Increasingly, no human makes the final call. A model does. This is already how power moves through modern institutions, and the change is bigger than automation.

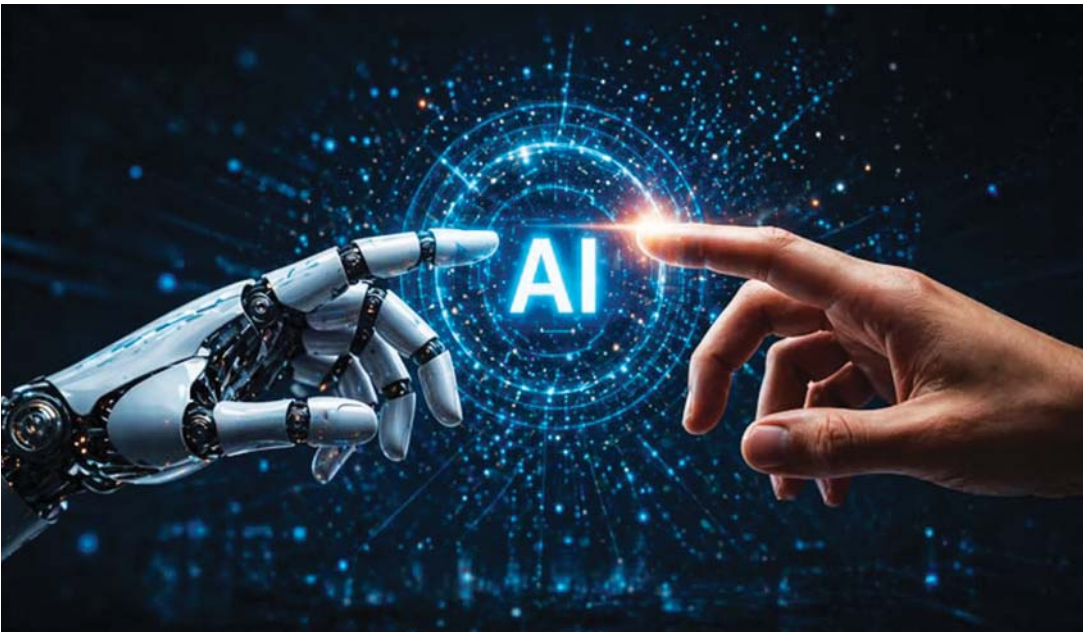
Artificial intelligence is usually discussed as a tool, a faster calculator, a smarter search engine. But a tool does only what it is told. A calculator cannot invent a new branch of mathematics. Today's AI systems learn things their creators never taught them and change in ways their designers did not predict. A chess engine did not simply get better at chess, it invented openings that centuries of grandmasters never conceived. That is not automation. That is agency.

The usual objection is that such agency stays confined to artificial arenas built for the purpose, a chessboard, a simulation. Drop the world's best chess engine into a forest and it cannot start a fire. But the same is true of us. A person left alone on a mountain-side with no tools would not last a week. Our intelligence also functions only inside a specific environment built by human cooperation itself. The question is not whether AI has a real environment to operate in, but whether we already built one for it.

We did. It is called bureaucracy.

The actual machinery of human power

Humans did not conquer the planet by being individually stronger or smarter than other animals. A person alone loses to a



lion. What no other species can do is cooperate in the millions with total strangers. Humans cooperate with people they will never meet, through a shared system of law and institutions that manufacture something invisible but essential: trust.

That is what bureaucracy actually is. A banker does not build furniture. She builds a bridge of trust between a saver who has never met an entrepreneur and an entrepreneur who has never met the saver, so one's money can fund the other's ambition. A judge, a regulator, a bishop, an accountant, each spends the day manufacturing trust between strangers using nothing but words: forms, statutes, ledgers, scriptures, judgments. Money itself is a trust technology, a printed note that lets a stranger hand you bread on the strength of a shared fiction.

This system is powerful



precisely because it does not require its operators to be generally capable. A lawyer who cannot start a fire can, through paperwork alone, reshape a city, because the bureaucratic environment that gives her words their power has already been imposed on the world. That is exactly the environment an AI thrives in.

Why AI is a native, not a guest

Human domination relies on large scale cooperation among strangers, sustained by bureaucratic systems such as laws, finance, and religion, designed to build trust. No human lawyer can hold every statute in their head. An AI

can hold an entire legal code and never mis-remember a clause. No accountant can track every transaction across a global bank. An AI can. A human bureaucrat is, at best, a custodian of a fraction of the rulebook. An AI can be native to the whole rulebook, because bureaucracy, stripped to its essentials, is nothing but words arranged to create trust and consequence.

This is why AI is uniquely placed to take over decisions that once required a human in the room: whether to grant a bank loan, admit a student, decide how long a prisoner should serve, or fire a missile at a target. Each was once human judgment wrapped in bureaucratic process. Increasingly, it is bureaucratic process with the human judgment quietly removed.

India is the loudest test case

Nowhere is this transition further along than in India, though it rarely gets described that way.

Over the past decade, India built the largest biometric identity and digital payments architecture on Earth, authenticating identity and clearing welfare payments for over a billion people with a thinner layer of human discretion than almost any comparable system anywhere. Credit scoring for small loans increasingly runs on models rather than branch managers. Courts, facing tens of millions of pending cases, are exploring AI assisted case triage. This was not built as an AI project, it was built for efficiency, but a machine legible bureaucracy is exactly the terrain an AI decision maker enters with the least friction. India built the habitat first, and AI is simply the most capable resident to move in.

That is a source of both pride and unease. A machine readable state can be more efficient and less corruptible. But a decision produced by a model is hard to argue with. You cannot cross examine an algorithm's reasoning the way you can cross examine an official's.

The question we have not answered

Two questions need answers before this transition goes further, not after a crisis forces them. Does every citizen have an enforceable right to know, in plain language, why an automated system decided against them? Does every citizen retain a genuine path to have that decision reviewed by a human being, not a token appeal, but a real one? A loan, a degree, a sentence, once decided by someone who could explain themselves, is quietly becoming a decision made by something that cannot be asked for anything, unless we insist, now, that it must be.

(Writer is a tech and social entrepreneur and Programme Director (Eastern India) at WHEELS Global Foundation, a Pan-IT alumni initiative working across 20+ states in India)

FROM THE WORLD

NIGERIA

Eight dead in Benue shooting

Gunmen opened fire at people after a funeral in north-central Nigeria, killing eight, police said on Monday.

The attack occurred in the early hours of Sunday in the Otukpo-Nobi community of Benue state. Five others were wounded, state police spokesperson Udemé Edet said.

It wasn't clear what triggered the attack. Herders and farmers have often clashed over resources in Benue, a key food-producing state in Nigeria. Last year, 150 people were killed in the Yelewata community.

Edet said thatched houses and a motorcycle were also set ablaze, adding that more officers have been deployed in the area.

Amnesty International Nigeria said at least 10 people were killed. Police in Nigeria often report more conservative casualty figures. (AP)

PAKISTAN

Hindu doctor killed in Karachi

A 28-year-old Hindu doctor was on Monday killed during a robbery in Pakistan's Sindh province, police said. The incident took place in Karachi's posh Clifton area. Akash Chand was killed when firing took place outside a private bank between the robbers and a bank security guard, senior police official SSP Mehroz Ali said. Chand, along with his father and cousin, had withdrawn 5 million rupees from another bank and were bringing two packets of 2.5 million each to deposit in the other bank, Ali said.

"As soon as their car stopped outside the bank, another car pulled up behind them and attempted to rob them of the money but the bank security guard standing at the door opened fire and the robbers also retaliated, and Chand was killed," Ali said.

The robbers got away with one packet of 2.5 million rupees. (PTI)

UK bans Revolutionary Guard over attacks on Jewish sites

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ London

A series of arson and vandalism attacks on Jewish sites in Britain were the work of a proxy group backed by Iran, the UK Government said on Monday.

The Government said it is banning the Islamic Movement of the Companions of the Right, or IMCR, also known as Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamia.

It also banned Iran's powerful paramilitary Revolutionary Guard. In a statement, Security Minister Angela Eagle said that the IMCR has claimed seven attacks in the UK.

The group had said online that it was responsible for a string of arson attacks on Jewish sites in London in recent months, including fires at synagogues and Jewish charity ambulances, as well as a Persian-language media organisation critical of Iran's Government. No one was injured in the blazes.

"Sitting behind IMCR were members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps



Qods Force, who almost certainly directed IMCR attacks across Europe," she said. Quds, or Jerusalem, Force is the Guard's expeditionary unit. The group sprang up online earlier this year and has also claimed responsibility for synagogue attacks in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Law enforcement officials and intelligence experts say Iran-backed proxy groups are

behind a growing number of attacks in Europe, most targeting the Jewish community and Persian-language media critical of Iran's Islamic Government.

They typically work by recruiting members of criminal groups to carry out sabotage and other attacks.

Earlier this month, two Romanian men were given prison sentences over the

stabbing of a journalist from a Persian-language television station, an attack the judge said was carried out on behalf of the Iranian State. There was no immediate comment from Iran.

The European Union in January listed the Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation over Tehran's bloody crackdown on protests.

27 killed, 25 critical in massive fire at Bangkok music Bar

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Bangkok

A huge fire tore through a music bar in Bangkok overnight, killing at least 27 people and leaving 25 hospitalised in critical condition in the Thai capital's most deadly blaze in 17 years.

Photos from the Rong Beer Na Ladprao bar in a northern part of the Thai capital showed people fleeing as flames shot out the single-story building and thick black smoke billowed into the sky. Shoes lost and scattered as their owners sought to flee could be seen in pictures from the aftermath of the tragedy.

Bangkok city officials said the fire broke out shortly before midnight Sunday, and it was about half an hour until firefighters brought it under control.

By daylight Monday morning, the site had been cordoned off as dozens of Thai forensic officers combed through the burned remains for clues about what caused the fire.

The building's street-



Police officers inspecting the site of a fire in Bangkok, Thailand AP

facing windows had been blown out and debris littered the sidewalk, including charred television sets, speakers and an electric guitar.

From outside, the scale of the devastation was visible through the shattered windows, where burned-out tables, some still holding empty beer bottles, stood inside.

Thai national police chief Kittharath Punpetch said most of the dead were found trapped in windowless bathrooms near one of the rear

exits of the bar, where they may have sheltered to escape the flames in the hall.

He said the exit had not been used, and people may have been obstructed from reaching it by a table set up in the hall to sell candy, or because it was too dark to find it. Access to another exit near the kitchen might also have been narrowed by shelving units and lockers, said Kittharath, who visited the scene Monday morning.

EU targets Russian spies over long-running cyber campaign

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Brussels

The European Union (EU) on Monday imposed sanctions on Russian military intelligence officers, hackers and private companies, denouncing what it called a yearslong cyber espionage campaign to undermine the bloc.

The move targeted nine people and four entities accused of links to an online spying network that the EU said has targeted Governments and carried out sabotage operations against critical infrastructure like heating and power plants since 2010.

The European Council said in a statement that those targeted "contribute to Russia's efforts to destabilise the EU, its member states and international partners." The espionage and attacks have taken place in at least nine countries.

The names of the individuals and entities - which usually companies, Government agencies, banks or other organisations - were not listed on the statement. It said France,



Germany, Poland, Cyprus, the Netherlands, Austria, Slovakia, Romania and Finland, "among others" have been targeted.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot said that France intends to summon the Russian ambassador in the coming days.

He told French BFM television that the aim of the cyber activities is "either to capture information, or sabotage the operation, for example, of railway infrastructures as it was the case in Poland." The EU focused its measures on the 16th Centre

of Russia's Federal Security Service, or FSB. It said the FSB has been "controlling a variety of cyber threat groups," and said it "has conducted a wide range of malicious cyber activities with growing severity."

Some countries have accused Russia of using cyberattacks and propaganda to interfere with elections. In April, Sweden said Wednesday that a pro-Russian group with links to Russia's security and intelligence services was behind a cyberattack on a heating plant last year.

NASA astronaut Anil Menon set for 8-month mission to space station

SAGAR KULKARNI ■ Washington

Anil Menon, a NASA astronaut of Indian descent, is set to embark on an eight-month mission to the International Space Station Tuesday from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan along with two Russian cosmonauts. The Roscosmos Soyuz MS-29 spacecraft is scheduled for lift-off from the Baikonur spaceport at 8.17 pm. (IST) on Tuesday and is expected to dock at the orbital laboratory after a little over three hours.

Besides Menon, Russian cosmonauts Pyotr Dubrov and Anna Kikina will be part of the 75th expedition to the ISS.

The Soyuz spacecraft will dock at the ISS at 11.56 pm. IST on Tuesday, and the astronauts will be onboard the ISS at around 1.25 am IST early Wednesday.

Once aboard, the trio will join NASA astronauts Jessica Meir, Jack Hathaway, and Chris Williams, European Space Agency astronaut Sophie Adenot, and Roscosmos cosmonauts Sergey Kud-Sverchkov, Sergei Mikaev, and Andrey Fedyaev. Born in Minneapolis to Ukrainian and Indian immigrants, Menon is an emergency medicine physician and a US Space Force colonel.

During his stint with the US Air Force, he served on the frontlines in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom and also worked for the Himalayan Rescue Association, caring for climbers on Mount Everest. Menon, 49, has also spent a year in India as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar to study and support Polio vaccination initiatives. He is scheduled to travel to space aboard the Roscosmos Soyuz MS-29 space-



craft along with cosmonauts Pyotr Dubrov and Anna Kikina. Menon began his career at NASA as a flight surgeon in 2014 and worked with astronauts living and working on the International Space Station.

He joined SpaceX in 2018, where he started the company's medical program, helped prepare for its first human space flights and worked closely in the development of Starship, the super heavy rocket and spacecraft for undertaking missions to the moon, Mars and beyond.

He was selected as a NASA astronaut in December 2021 and joined the two-year training programme next month.

Menon's wife Anna Wilhelm is also an astronaut and travelled to space in September 2024 as part of Polaris Dawn, a private crewed spaceflight operated by SpaceX. The spaceflight lasted for nearly five days. While on board the ISS, Menon will conduct a series of experiments to study the physiological toll of long-duration spaceflight and examine how microgravity affects blood flow, vein structure, and blood composition in astronauts. (PTI)

Ex-minister murder probe taken over by UK Police



ADITI KHANNA ■ London

Britain's counter-terrorism police on Monday took charge of an ongoing investigation into the murder of a former Tory minister and outspoken far-right politician who was found dead in her home in south-west England.

Ann Widdecombe, 78, was attacked in the small village of Haytor Vale at Dartmoor in Devon last week. Prime Minister Keir Starmer led condemnations over the "really shocking news" that shook the political establishment across party lines.

A 28-year-old white British man from Rotherham, South Yorkshire, arrested on suspicion of murder on Saturday, has now been re-arrested on terrorism-related charges, Counter Terrorism Policing South East (CTPSE) said.

UK Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood took to social media to reveal that "new information and evidence" had emerged in the case, which led the CTPSE to take charge of the investigation. "The police are pursuing multiple lines of enquiry to establish the motivation for this attack," said Mahmood, who will make a statement in Parliament with further details.

CTPSE said, "new information and evidence have come to light during what has been a dynamic and complex investigation" and as a result, it is now leading the investigation.

"The man in custody has since been re-arrested on suspicion of commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism," said the CTPSE. (PTI)

Saudi airstrikes hit Sanaa airport, say Houthis

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Cairo

Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen said Saudi airstrikes hit Sanaa International Airport on Monday, while the internationally recognised Government in Yemen said they were meant to prevent an Iranian plane from landing.

For years, a Saudi-led coalition based in Yemen's south, including the internationally recognised Government, has been fighting the Houthis in the north.

Saudi Arabia did not immediately acknowledge carrying out airstrikes in Yemen, and its officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Gen Taher al-Aqili, the Government's defence min-



ister, said on X that the airport's runway was struck to stop the plane carrying the Houthi delegation after attending the funeral of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In a video statement released shortly before the strikes, Al-Aqili warned against infiltrating Yemeni airspace with Iranian air-

craft. "At this moment, we say that our patience has run out. Accordingly, we will respond appropriately to this treacherous and brutal act, and we will confront and deal with the hostile aircraft violating Yemeni airspace and sovereignty by all available means," he said. The Houthis said the plane changed its route and

landed at Hodeida Airport. There were no immediate reports of damage to the airport in Sanaa.

A Houthi official, Brig Gen Yahya Saree, said on Telegram that Saudi Arabia launched the airstrikes in what he called an "end to the de-escalation phase." He warned that "this aggression will not go unanswered or unpunished."

The Yemeni defence ministry issued orders to evacuate the airport and surrounding areas. Rashad al-Alimi, who leads Yemen's ruling Presidential Leadership Council, said Iran had requested to operate a flight by Iranian airline Mahan Air from Tehran to Sanaa to return the Houthi delegation.



Three boys playing in the shallow waters of the Strait of Hormuz, as a plume of smoke rises from an explosion in the background, off Bandar Abbas, Iran on Monday AP

Pakistan deports over 2.6 million Afghan nationals in 3 years amid crackdown

M ZULQERNAIN ■ Lahore

Pakistan has deported more than 2.6 million Afghan nationals, including women and children, in the last three years, an official said on Monday. These deportations were part of a larger crackdown on undocumented Afghan nationals and those overstaying in the country without a valid visa.

The Punjab Government routinely conducts surveys to identify illegal or undocumented immigrants. The spokesperson for the Punjab home department's foreign national security said in a statement that the provincial Government alone detained



1,38,342 Afghans in its holding centres, completed their documents and deported them.

He added that around 2.6 million Afghan nationals staying illegally in Pakistan have been sent back in the last three years. The depor-

tations are usually carried out through the Torkham checkpoint in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

The crackdown has led to anxiety in the Afghan community, with some residents claiming they have

lived in Pakistan for generations. Local Pashtuns have also reported being subjected to undue harassment and identity checks during police raids.

The UN Human Rights Commission has also expressed concerns about the scale and nature of these deportations. The authorities intensified the crackdown against illegal Afghan immigrants after an armed conflict between the two countries in April. Both countries witnessed intermittent hostilities along the frontier, which intensified after reported Afghan action in response to Pakistani airstrikes targeting militant positions. (PTI)

3 POLICEMEN KILLED IN MILITANT ATTACKS IN PAKISTAN'S KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

Peshawar: Three police personnel were killed and as many others injured in separate militant attacks in Pakistan's restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, police said. Two policemen, including an assistant sub-inspector, were killed and three others seriously injured when an improvised explosive device hit a police armoured vehicle near Mashah Jan Bungalow on the Tank-Waziristan Main Road. The injured personnel were shifted to a nearby hospital, while security forces cordoned off the area and

launched a search operation to trace those responsible for the attack, police said. In a separate incident in Nowshera district, unidentified assailants opened fire on a police constable on Kheskhi Road, killing them on the spot.

Governor Faisal condemned the attacks and sought reports from the relevant authorities. They paid tribute to the slain policemen, expressed condolences to their families, and directed authorities to ensure the best possible treatment for the injured personnel. (PTI)

Ebola centres strike over unpaid salaries in Congo

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Bunia

Dozens of people working at an Ebola treatment centre in northeast Congo went on strike on Monday over unpaid salaries and bonuses.

The striking staff at Rwampara General Hospital in Ituri province includes epidemiologists, case investigators, drivers and gravediggers who say they have not been paid by the Congolese authorities. The hospital was shuttered by protesting staff, who blocked the road leading to the medical facility.

Some of the centre's health workers and those working



on the ground began striking last week, accusing authorities of failing to pay their wages since the outbreak began in May.

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Oil prices jump as US and Iran carry out airstrikes

USD/KRW	KOSPI
1,509.80	7,484.92
▲ 0.30 (0.02%)	▲ 193.01 (2.65%)

Oil prices jumped and world shares were mixed on Monday after the US carried out airstrikes and Iran retaliated. In early European trading, Germany's DAX added 0.2 per cent to 25,105.55 and the CAC 40 in Paris edged 0.1 per cent higher, to 8,347.26. Britain's FTSE 100 also was up just 0.1 per cent, at 10,506.86.

US stock futures were mixed, with the contract for the S&P 500 down 0.3 per cent and that for the Dow nearly unchanged. The Nasdaq composite future lost 0.9 per cent. The price of Brent crude, the international standard, climbed as much as nearly 5 per cent early Monday before falling back. As of early morning in Europe, it was up 2.3 per cent at \$77.72 per barrel, while US benchmark crude added 2.1 per cent to \$72.92 per barrel. Prices for both types of crude oil recently had slipped back to around the levels they were at before the war with Iran began after the two sides set an interim agreement on ending the conflict and ships resumed transporting oil through the Strait of Hormuz. However, the United States launched several waves of strikes on Iran into Monday morning over an Iranian attack on a container ship in the strait that set it ablaze and left a crew member missing over the weekend. Iran retaliated by targeting countries across the Middle East. In Asian share trading, Tokyo's Nikkei 225 index lost 1.9 per cent to 67,242.73, while in Seoul, the Kospi declined 9 per cent to 6,806.93. It's now at its lowest level since early May. (PTI)

Retail inflation inches up to 4.38% in May: Govt data

Retail inflation inched up to 4.38 per cent in June compared to 3.93 per cent in May, mainly due to higher prices of food items, according to government data released on Monday.

The food inflation based on the consumer price index (CPI) was 5.32 per cent in June, higher than 4.78 per cent in May, according to the data.

The government has mandated the Reserve Bank of India to ensure that the headline inflation remains at 4 per cent, with a margin of 2 per cent on either side. (PTI)

INDIA'S EXPORTS RISE 15.5% IN JUNE, TRADE DEFICIT WIDENS TO \$30.43 BN

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

India's exports rose by 15.5 per cent to \$40.41 billion in June, even as the trade deficit widened to \$30.43 billion.

Imports in June went up by about 31 per cent to \$70.84 billion.

During April-June this fiscal, exports increased 15.92 per cent to \$129.32 billion, while imports rose 19.89 per cent to \$216.18 billion.

Gold imports in the first quarter of this fiscal year rose to \$11.01 billion from \$7.49 billion in April-June last year.

India's exports to West Asian countries rose 7.29 per cent to \$5 billion in June, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agarwal said in a press briefing on trade data.

Agarwal attributed the increase in the country's inbound shipments to higher imports of crude oil, electronics, machinery, and precious metals.

The Pioneer

BHUBANESWAR | TUESDAY | JULY 14, 2026

Build AI, cybersecurity to tackle rising threats: IT Secy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Government on Monday stressed the need to build domestic capabilities in artificial intelligence and cybersecurity, with IT Secretary S Krishnan saying India has "no other option" but to strengthen indigenous capacity as cyber threats grow in scale and sophistication.

Krishnan said rapid digitisation has brought significant gains in ease of living, ease of doing business and economic efficiency, but has also exposed businesses and individuals to evolving cyber risks.

"A critical area we need to act on is ensuring that in the AI space, what is the infrastructure and the capability we build as a country, both in terms of models, data, how we use this, how this infra-

structure is something that we can support ourselves with, and the critical thing here is building domestic capacity," Krishnan said.

Cybersecurity is one of the most important concerns to be prioritised for preserving the benefits derived from digitisation, Krishnan emphasised.

The secretary also released the second edition of the Digital Threat Report 2025-26 for the Banking, Financial Services and Insurance (BFSI) and payments ecosystem. The report provides financial institutions, regulators and cybersecurity leaders with an executive assessment of the threats reshaping banking, financial services, insurance and digital payments.

"In today's world, all of us understand that cybersecurity is one of the most important concerns that we have to

address if we have to preserve all the benefits that we have derived from digitisation," Krishnan said.

He noted that cyber threats now span multiple levels, from cybercrime targeting

individuals through financial and reputational losses, to ransomware attacks on organisations, and cyber warfare that can undermine governments and national infrastructure.

Framework deal is ready, to be signed at right time: Official on India-US trade pact

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Negotiations for a trade agreement between India and the US are progressing well, and the framework deal is ready which will be signed at the right time, an official said on Monday.

The official said that India is seeking a comparative advantage on the tariff front in the agreement vis-a-vis its competitor nations.

"There was a very good discussion (with the US team). The framework deal is ready...whenever there is right time, it will be signed. We are negotiating a framework deal and a bilateral trade agreement (BTA), and

both things are progressing well," the official said.

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and US Trade Representative Jamieson

Greer last month held bilateral talks on issues related to the first phase of the bilateral trade agreement here.

Trade deals are all about

preferential market access or comparative advantage.

"So that is something which is getting structured, whenever it is ready, things will be signed. But we are on a safe way, our understanding is safe, both sides are very clear what is there in the framework deal, what is being negotiated under BTA, and we are progressing there," the official, who does not wish to be named, said.

The official clarified that there is no dissension, and they do not see any challenge around it.

The bilateral trade is growing between the two countries. India has also been increasing its energy imports from the US.

Silver futures tumble amid strengthening US dollar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Silver futures tumbled by ₹3,783 to ₹2.18 lakh per kilogram on Monday as the fresh escalation in the US-Iran conflict drove oil prices higher and boosted the dollar.

On the Multi Commodity Exchange, silver for September delivery declined by ₹3,783, or 1.7 per cent, to ₹2,18,881 per kg in a business turnover of 11,733 lots.

metal plunged ₹4,746, or 6.2 per cent, to settle at ₹2.22 lakh per kg over the past week. Traders said that higher energy prices could stoke inflation and keep US interest rates elevated, which prompted investors to trim exposure to precious metals.

"Silver prices declined sharply on Monday as rising crude oil rates, a stronger US dollar, and higher Treasury bond yields reduced the appeal of bullion," said Gaurav Garg, Research Analyst at Lemonn Markets Desk.

He said oil prices surged as renewed

military exchanges between the US and Iran fuelled concerns over disruptions to crude supplies through the Strait of Hormuz, intensifying inflation worries.

"Despite the weakness in prices, investor appetite for silver remained firm, with exchange-traded funds (ETFs) attracting a record ₹4,286 crore in inflows during June," Pinky Yadav, Commodity Fundamental Analyst at Choice Broking, said.

In the international markets, Comex

silver futures for September delivery fell \$1.68, or 3 per cent, to \$58.47 per ounce in New York.

"Silver futures slipped below \$60 per ounce in the global markets as rising crude oil prices and escalating US-Iran tensions strengthened expectations that the Federal Reserve will keep interest rates higher for longer," brokerage firm Axis Securities said.

According to Anindya Banerjee, Head of Commodity and Currency Research at Kotak Securities, Brent crude hovered near \$79 per barrel, and WTI traded above \$74 after fresh exchanges between Washington and Tehran clouded prospects for restoring normal tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz.

Analysts said market participants are awaiting speeches by Federal Reserve officials, including Michelle Bowman and Christopher Waller, for fresh signals on the US monetary policy outlook, which could provide the next catalyst for bullion.

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He said while artificial intelligence (AI) enables malicious actors to mount more sophisticated attacks, at the same time, it equips defenders with advanced tools to detect and respond to threats more quickly.

Calling for continuous vigilance, Krishnan said cybersecurity should be treated as an "enterprise-wide systemic risk" and embedded into broader digital governance frameworks, including AI governance, alongside privacy and operational resilience.

He also emphasised the need to strengthen identity and access management, build resilient software and hardware systems, and ensure business continuity in the face of cyber threats.

On AI, Krishnan said India must develop domestic capabilities across models, data

and computing infrastructure. "In this particular space, there is no other option but to build domestic capacity," Krishnan said, adding that strengthening indigenous technological capabilities is critical for safeguarding the country's digital ecosystem and reducing strategic vulnerabilities.

The report released by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), along with the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In), the Computer Security Incident Response Team in Finance (CSIRT-Fin) and SISA, draws on extensive digital forensics and incident response (DFIR) research, analysis aligned with CERT-In and CSIRT-Fin observations, and research into adversarial AI.

Date	Rate (₹ vs \$)	Change
Jul 6	95.43	(-25p)
Jul 7	94.96	(+47p)
Jul 8	95.48	(-52p)
Jul 9	95.47	(+1p)
Jul 10	95.38	(+9p)
Jul 13	95.65*	(-27p)

*Provisional (Inverted Scale)

Rupee falls 27 paise to close at 95.65 against US dollar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Mumbai

The rupee depreciated 27 paise to close at 95.65 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, weighed down by elevated crude oil prices after Iran declared the Strait of Hormuz closed.

Forex traders said renewed drone and missile strikes between the US and Iran prompted supply concerns, while elevated crude oil prices and a strong greenback triggered capital outflows.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the rupee opened at 95.72 against the American currency and traded in a range of 95.58-95.86 during the session.

The rupee finally closed at 95.65 (provisional), down 27 paise from its previous close.

On Friday, the rupee rose 9 paise to settle at 95.38 against the US dollar.

"The Indian rupee opened lower as the US-Iran war intensified over the weekend. A surge in crude oil prices and a rise in the US dollar too pressurised the rupee. However, the rupee recovered from lower levels on recovery in the domestic markets and some softening of crude oil prices from the day's highs," said Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Mirae Asset ShareKhan.

Choudhary further said, "We expect the rupee to trade with a negative bias on risk aversion in global markets amid heightened tensions between the US and Iran. However, diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions may support the rupee at lower levels."

Gold drops ₹1,500 to ₹1.47 lakh/10g; silver slumps ₹2,000 in Delhi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Gold prices declined ₹1,500 to ₹1.47 lakh per 10 grams in the national Capital on Monday and silver slumped ₹2,000 tracking West Asia uncertainties.

The yellow metal of 99.9 per cent purity depreciated ₹1,500 to ₹1,47,000 per 10 grams (inclusive of all taxes) from Friday's closing level of ₹1,48,500 per 10 grams, according to local marketmen.

Silver also plunged by ₹2,000 to ₹2,35,000 per kilo-

gram (inclusive of all taxes). The white metal had settled at ₹2,37,000 per kg in the preceding session.

Traders said the renewed flare-up in West Asia lifted crude oil prices, fuelling inflation concerns and strengthening the US dollar,

which weighed on the precious metals.

"Gold prices edged lower on Monday, tracking weakness in international markets as renewed tensions in the Middle East lifted crude oil prices and revived inflation concerns," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst - Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

He said the latest escalation between the US and Iran has heightened concerns over disruptions to global energy supplies and tighter oil market conditions in the third quarter.

CIC directs ministry to share petrol, ethanol, profit data

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Central Information Commission (CIC) has directed the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC), the oil ministry's planning arm, to reveal historical data on petrol production and imports, ethanol procurement and blending, and petroleum sector profits.

The direction was given to share the information with an RTI applicant after the commission found that the cell provided only "partial information."

Information Commissioner Khushwant Singh Sethi also directed PPAC to provide the

web link for ethanol blending notifications, transfer the query on ethanol suppliers to the concerned public authority, and invoke the appropriate exemption under the RTI Act, while responding to the request for company-wise petrol supplier information.

The RTI application sought six sets of information relating to India's petrol and ethanol programme, including fuel production and imports, ethanol blending norms, procurement and consumption of ethanol, supplier details and profits from

petrol sales. The commission observed that "the respondent has provided partial information to the appellant" and directed it to furnish a revised response on different queries.

The first query sought year-wise details from 2014-15 onwards of petrol purchased, imported, and produced in India, annual expenditure on petrol, and source-wise break-up.

PPAC replied that import, export, production and state-wise data were available on its website, but company details were "of commercial & confidential nature" and exempt under Sections 8(1)(d) and 8(1)(e) of the RTI Act.

Stock markets recover losses to close flat, IT shares cushion decline

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Mumbai

Benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty recovered from early lows to close marginally higher in a volatile trade on Monday as buying in IT and consumer durable shares helped offset the impact of rebounding crude oil prices and escalation in West Asia tensions.

After a weak start, the 30-share BSE Sensex closed higher by 47.01 points, or 0.06 per cent, to settle at 77,616.40, marking its third straight day of gains.

The index opened sharply down by over 711 points and hit a low of 76,857.43 in early trade. However, buying in IT

shares such as TCS and Infosys and consumer durables helped pare losses, with the Sensex rebounding around 931 points from the low to hit a high of 77,789.29. Profit booking in the last hour erased the gains.

The 50-share NSE Nifty eked out an uptick of 4.10 points, or 0.02 per cent, to end at 24,211, registering its third day of gains. The index hit a low of 24,000.20 and a high of 24,259.8 during the day.

Resilience in IT and consumer durables stocks helped offset the impact of geopolitical concerns, enabling the benchmark indices to recover from early losses and close on a largely

Index	Open	Low	High	Close	Change
NSE NIFTY	24,039.40	24,000.20	24,259.80	24,211.00	4.10 (0.02%)
BSE SENSEX	76,963.35	76,857.43	77,789.29	77,616.40	47.01 (0.06%)

KBK Infographics

flat note, an expert said.

From the Sensex pack, Tata Consultancy Services jumped 5.43 per cent to emerge as the top gainer, while HCL

Tech climbed 5.02 per cent, Tech Mahindra 3.34 per cent, Infosys 3.17 per cent, NTPC 2.18 per cent and Kotak Mahindra Bank 1.83 per cent.

Tata Steel, Eternal, InterGlobe Aviation, Maruti, UltraTech Cement and Bharat Electronics were among the laggards. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, jumped 2.57 per cent to \$77.96 per barrel.

"Indian equity markets ended largely flat after opening on a weak note, as investors adopted a wait-and-watch approach amid escalating geopolitical tensions between the United States and Iran. Continued hostilities around the Strait of Hormuz, which have disrupted oil tanker movements and pushed crude oil prices sharply higher, kept overall market sentiment cautious," Ponmudi R, CEO of Enrich

Money, an online trading and wealth tech firm, said.

In Asian markets, South Korea's Kospi slumped 8.95 per cent. Japan's Nikkei 225 and Shanghai's SSE Composite index also ended lower, while Hong Kong's Hang Seng index settled marginally higher.

Markets in Europe were trading mixed. US markets ended higher on Friday.

"Markets witnessed a volatile session on Monday and ended almost unchanged amid mixed global cues. Investor sentiment remained cautious amid renewed geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, which pushed Brent crude prices higher and weighed

on global risk appetite," Ajit Mishra, SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.

However, resilience in the IT pack following the start of the earnings season, coupled with selective buying in heavyweight stocks across sectors, helped the market recover from its intraday lows, he added.

The BSE MidCap Select index went up by 0.51 per cent, while SmallCap Select index dipped marginally by 0.03 per cent.

Among sectors, IT surged 3.49 per cent, Focused IT (3.30 per cent), Consumer Durables (0.59 per cent), Utilities (0.35 per cent), Auto (0.31 per cent) and Bankex (0.15 per cent).

Phase 5: Completed the targeted installation of surveillance systems for several independent and individual houses and school of specially abled kids and people in and around Chennai. (Semmanchery, perumbakkam, Tambaram, Medavakkam, Ayyappakkam, Kundrathur, Nandanakkam)

BRIEFLY

Sinner evolving just like Federer, Nadal and Djokovic before him



A perfectly-placed topspin lob winner that sailed beyond reach of his 6-foot-6 (1.98-meter) opponent and landed on the outside of the baseline in the second game.

A delicate drop shot which made Alexander Zverev change direction so suddenly that the German player over-extended his right knee at a crucial point of the third set.

Sure, there were plenty of the usual whizzing, missile-like baseline winners from Jannik Sinner in his four-set victory over Zverev in the Wimbledon final. He also showed off the new variety of his game, though - which came in handy when Zverev unleashed more power than he had used before against the top-ranked player. The variety of shots were what Sinner's two coaches, Darren Cahill and Simone Vagnozzi, appreciated most from their player in Sunday's match.

Just like the Big Three and Big Four before them - Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray - Sinner, Zverev and Carlos Alcaraz (who is out injured) are continually evolving their games, Cahill noted.

"Alexander is now playing a different style of tennis against Jannik," Cahill said. "We know Jannik is going to have to improve in certain areas to handle that type of game. Carlos is going to come back really strong, as well - as we all hope. You need to keep adding things to his game. "We saw a lot of the stuff he doesn't normally like doing, even in the final today: sliced backhands, a couple lobs, couple drop shots. Really stepping up when he needed to in the big moments." Deficit to Alcaraz in Slams count reduced: Sinner's second consecutive Wimbledon victory matched the two titles that Alcaraz won before him at the All England Club and raised his overall tally to five Grand Slams - narrowing the gap to Alcaraz's seven. (AP)

Former Spanish leader criticised for comments about France's World Cup team



A former Spanish prime minister is facing criticism for saying that France's World Cup team "does not have any French players," which French and Spanish leaders have called racist.

Mariano Rajoy, a member of Spain's conservative Popular Party, made the comment in a column for Spanish outlet El Debate ahead of Tuesday's World Cup semifinal between the European neighbors.

"They've won every match they've played at this World Cup and are currently top of the FIFA rankings. They also have an exceptionally strong squad. That said, one thing they don't have is any French players," Rajoy wrote on July 10. On Monday, French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot told French broadcaster BFM TV that "France has no skin color. Any contrary claim stems from stupidity, racism or a combination of the two."

A day earlier, French Football Federation president Philippe Diallo wrote on X that "Mariano Rajoy's remarks about the French team carry intolerable whiffs of racism," adding that "they also raise questions about the deplorable climate that gives rise to such sentiments. Our players do not need a certificate of nationality from a former Spanish prime minister." Spain's ruling Socialist government swiftly condemned the remarks by Rajoy, who was prime minister from 2011 to 2018.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez referenced the comments without naming his predecessor, writing on X: "There are those who still measure belonging by surname, place of birth, or skin color. Others measure it by our roots in a country and our will to contribute to it. Playing soccer. Caring for our elders. Or opening businesses. France, we'll see you in the semifinals. May the best one win and may racism lose." (AP)

Named in CWG contingent, Nandakumar declared ineligible

PHILEM DIPAK SINGH ■ New Delhi

Para swimmer Tejas Nandakumar, who was named in the Indian contingent for the upcoming Glasgow Commonwealth Games, will not compete in the multi-sport event starting on July 23 as his entry has been rejected by the organisers due to a classification issue.

The 20-year-old Nandakumar's name was there in the list of competitors issued by the government last week. He was to compete in the men's 50m freestyle S7 event in Glasgow and his slot was earlier accepted by the organisers.

S7 classification in para swimming is for athletes who have the full use of their arms and trunk, but have limited leg function, are missing parts of both legs, or have limited movement in all four limbs. Nandakumar, who has previously competed in the Para-Asian Games in 2023, has a congenital condition



affecting his legs.

In a letter sent on July 9, the local organisers have informed the Indian

Olympic Association (IOA) that he is no longer eligible to compete following a validation process by the international federation - World Para Athletics - post June 23.

"Following the IF validation process (post June 23), the athlete (Tejas Nandakumar) has been identified as ineligible to represent your CGA in the Para Swimming competition of G2026 (Glasgow 2026)," Georgia Lambert, Sports Entries and Information Coordinator - Oceania & Asia Glasgow 2026, wrote in the letter.

"The athlete must be internationally classified with a confirmed sport class status or review with a fixed review date of 2027 or later at the sport entries deadline of 23 June 2026. As the class status for Tejas is R-2025, he is therefore unfortunately ineligible to compete."

Classification determines which athletes are eligible to compete in a sport

and how they are then grouped together for competition. This is done to safeguard the integrity of fair competition.

Classification of athletes is done by a panels of medical and technical experts in their sport. Athlete evaluation normally takes place before competitions and they are given slots.

Classification of athletes is not permanent. Athletes with progressive conditions require periodic reviews.

Depending on the type and severity of the impairment an athlete might undergo athlete evaluation several times throughout his or her career. Some impairments change over time and junior athletes may not yet have reached skeletal maturity by the time of first classification.

In these cases, classifiers can decide that the athlete must be seen again or reviewed at the next competition or at set time-frames. (PTI)

The cloud over Argentina's 2026 World Cup campaign: Why perception matters



SHAKYA MITRA

When the draw for the 2026 FIFA World Cup was made in December 2025, few disputed that defending champions Argentina had received one of the tournament's more favourable paths. On paper, a group featuring Austria, Algeria and Jordan appeared considerably less demanding than those faced by several other contenders. Their projected knockout route also looked manageable, with possible meetings against Uruguay in the Round of 32 and the runners-up of Group G or Group D in the Round of 16, leaving Portugal as their first expected major test in the quarter-finals. By comparison, teams such as Germany, Brazil and the Netherlands faced significantly tougher routes.

There is nothing inherently wrong in receiving a favourable draw. World Cup draws are lotteries, and every nation enters the tournament knowing that luck inevitably plays a role. What has complicated Argentina's campaign, is the growing perception that they have also benefited from favourable officiating and institutional goodwill. Whether that perception is justified or not, it has become one of the defining narratives of the tournament.

This debate has lingered since Argentina's victorious 2022 World Cup campaign, their first in 36 years. Several high-profile refereeing decisions from Qatar remain frequent points of discussion, including the heated quarter-final against the Netherlands, the penalty awarded against Croatia in the semi-final, and the penalty given in the final against France fol-



lowing what looked a relatively soft challenge.

The presence of Lionel Messi inevitably amplifies this debate. Widely regarded as one of the greatest footballers in history, Messi now plays for Inter Miami and has spent the latter stages of his career based in one of the host nations of the 2026 tournament. Before lifting the World Cup in Qatar, he carried the burden of being considered perhaps the greatest player never to win football's biggest prize. That debate ended in December 2022. Now, with Messi playing his sixth World Cup while continuing to add to his extraordinary goalscoring record, every controversial decision involving Argentina is

viewed through the lens of protecting football's biggest global icon.

Events during this tournament have only strengthened that perception. Against Algeria, Messi avoided even a booking after striking the back of an opponent's leg. Against Austria, an Argentine goal stood despite protests over an alleged foul in the build-up. Viewed individually, each incident can be defended within the Laws of the Game. Taken together, however, they reinforce an existing narrative that Argentina consistently receive the benefit of doubt.

The Round of 16 victory over Egypt has become the focal point of

that debate. Egypt led 2-0 with just 11 minutes of normal time remaining before the match turned dramatically. In the second half Egypt had what would have been a crucial goal ruled out after the referee penalised a foul through the aid of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR). Later, Argentina scored what proved to be the decisive goal following a challenge in their own half that closely resembled the earlier incident.

If one goes by technicalities, there is a credible argument that both decisions were correct. Football, however, is often judged less by technical interpretation than by consistency. The question that football observers are asking is whether those same interpretations would have been applied had the teams been wearing the opposite shirts.

Fortune has certainly favoured Argentina in several respects. Their relatively comfortable group-stage draw was simply the product of chance, and if projected opponents such as Uruguay, the United States, Turkey or Portugal failed to stand in their path to the semi-finals, that is hardly something for which

Argentina can be criticised. At the same time, narrow victories over Cape Verde, Egypt and Switzerland demonstrate that supposedly easier fixtures still demand difficult victories, with Argentina's stronger attacking options making decisive late contributions.

Other developments have nevertheless fuelled the perception that appearances are working against FIFA. President Gianni Infantino remarked publicly that he had "suffered" while watching Argentina's dramatic victory over Cape Verde. Although intended as an emotional observation, the comment inevitably attracted criticism given his position.

None of this diminishes Argentina's quality. While they may be marginally weaker than the side that triumphed in 2022 particularly following Angel Di Maria's retirement from international football they remain one of the world's elite teams, fully capable of winning matches on their own merits. That is precisely why the perception of institutional protection is so damaging. It overshadows legitimate achievements, casts doubt over genuine victories and shifts attention away from the football itself.

Whether FIFA has actually favoured Argentina is, in many ways, less significant than the fact that a substantial number of supporters believe it has. For a tournament that prides itself on being the pinnacle of global sport, perception matters almost as much as reality. Fairness must not only exist; it must also be seen to exist. Until that confidence is fully restored, every close decision involving Argentina and Lionel Messi will continue to invite suspicion, a situation that befits neither the three-time champions nor the World Cup itself.

The writer is a sports management consultant

World Cup semifinals: Mbappe vs Yamal and Messi vs Kane



JAMES ROBSON ■ Atlanta

It's a World Cup semifinal line-up for the ages. Four previous champions and the four top-ranking teams in the world. Five of the six top scorers, one GOAT and one of the bitterest rivalries in soccer.

Argentina, Spain, France and England went into the tournament as the top four in FIFA's rankings and are two wins away from being crowned champion of the world again. It's just too close to call either semifinal matchup: France will play Spain in Arlington, Texas, on Tuesday and England will face Argentina in Atlanta on Wednesday.

Not since 1990 has the final four of a World Cup been made up entirely of previous winners. England and Argentina were involved then, although they didn't play each other. Then, like now, Argentina was the defending champion - after beating West Germany in the 1986 final in

Mexico - and went on to lose to West Germany in the 1990 final.

And this year could also see a repeat final from 2022 if France and Argentina both advance.

England vs. Argentina: A bitter rivalry: Argentina must overcome England in a match that resumes a fierce rivalry that goes beyond the soccer field, with tensions also relating to the 1982 conflict over the Falklands Islands.

On the field there have been numerous flashpoints between the teams on the World Cup stage. Argentina captain Antonio Rattin, whose death was announced on Saturday, was sent off in a bad-tempered quarter-final match against winner England in 1966. England manager Alf Ramsey tried to stop his players from swapping shirts with their opponents after a 1-0 victory.

Roll the clock forward 20 years and in 1986 Diego Maradona's infamous "Hand of God" goal

helped Argentina to a 2-1 win against England in the quarter-finals on the way to lifting the trophy.

David Beckham was sent off in 1998 for kicking out at Argentina midfielder Diego Simeone, who was predictably criticized by the English media for his reaction to what appeared to be light contact. Argentina won the round of 16 match on penalties.

Beckham got his revenge four years later by scoring a penalty in a 1-0 win that contributed to Argentina being eliminated at the group stage.

France vs. Spain: A quick chance for French revenge

France and Spain meet again in the semifinals of a major tournament, just two years since going head-to-head at the European Championship. Spain won 2-1 with a then-16-year-old Lamine Yamal on the score sheet and went on to lift the Euros by beating England in final. (AP)

What to know about rules behind FIFA WC's most contentious calls



JAMES ROBSON ■ Atlanta

It was another game-changing moment at the World Cup that had more to do with television replays in a room far away than a moment of brilliance on the field. The sending off of Switzerland's Breel Embolo in Saturday's quarterfinal game against Argentina was the latest call that may have left fans scratching their heads, not least because of the confusing name of the newly implemented law that swung the match.

It is called the "mistaken identity" rule. Yet, technically, Embolo was not shown a second yellow card - resulting in a red - for a case of mistaken identity. It was because the referee Joao Pinheiro did not see in real time that the forward had simulated a foul under a challenge from Argentina's Leandro Paredes.

Paredes was initially shown a yellow card, which is a key factor. Under FIFA rules, because Paredes was shown a card, the video assistant referee (VAR) can intervene and recommend that the on-field official review the sideline monitor. After review, the referee deemed Embolo to have committed a "clear simulation" and showed him a second yellow card and sent him off.

The rules state that the VAR can assist when the referee penalises the "wrong team for an offence that results in a red or yellow card being shown to the wrong player." It was a pivotal point in the match, coming five minutes after Switzerland had made it 1-1. Argentina won 3-1 after extra time. "The referee made the wrong decision," Switzerland coach Murat Yakin said. "I know they will protect their referee, but this rule destroyed our game today, and it's very painful, and to be eliminated in that way hurts a lot." It is not the first time at this World Cup that teams have hit out against new rules or technology.

Germany infuriated by disallowed goal: Newly tightened regulations contributed to Germany's shock elimination in the round of 32.

Defender Jonathan Tah's potentially game-winning goal in extra time against Paraguay was ruled out after VAR



review for a foul on goalkeeper Orlando Gill.

Replays showed Germany's Waldemar Anton push Gill to the ground, but the minimal contact led to criticism of the decision. FIFA's referees chief Pierluigi Collina said officials had been told to punish incidents when players try to block opponents and make no attempt to play the ball, especially where goalkeepers are concerned. Germany went on to lose the game in a penalty shootout, with Tah firing a decisive spot kick over the bar.

High tech ball costs Croatia: The words "connected ball technology" will likely haunt Luka Modric and Croatia for years to come.

The high-tech soccer ball fitted with "advanced sensors" used at this World Cup cost Croatia a dramatic late equaliser against Portugal in the round of 32.

Egypt heartbroken against Argentina: It was shaping up to be one of the great World Cup upsets. Egypt led 2-0 against defending champion Argentina in the round of 16 and might have been 3-0 up if not for VAR. (AP)

Please note that the undersigned Authorized Officer of the Bank reserves the right to postpone, adjourn, modify, suspend, or cancel the auction proceedings without prior notice and without assigning any reason. The Authorized Officer also reserves the right to accept or reject any bid(s), in whole or in part, and any such decision shall be final and binding on all participants.

Date : 14.07.2026
Place : ODISHA

Sd/- Authorized Officer
HDFC BANK LTD.